

TORA-SAN, WISH YOU WERE HERE: NOSTALGIC FILMMAKING IN THE
WORLD'S LONGEST FILM SERIES

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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The longest film series to feature the same actor, the *It's Tough Being a Man* film series, known to fans as the *Tora-san* series, celebrated its fiftieth anniversary with the release of its fiftieth installment, *Tora-san, Wish You Were Here* (2019). Released twenty-two years after the previous entry and the death of its main actor, this film takes a nostalgic look back on the franchise in the absence the titular Tora-san by a particular technique of inserting scenes from previous films in the series as memories of the film's main characters. I argue that the film uses its cinematic form to engage with nostalgia in three forms in order to bring Tora-san back. The first is by engaging with the cinematic image cultivated by the series during Japan's high-growth and bubble economy eras, an image that is defined by Tora-san's complex character and depictions of vanishing spaces in modern Japan. The second is the use of self-referentiality in the film, adopting the narrative formula of the previous films as well as rooting the cinematic world into the present. Thirdly, the techniques of filmmaking itself are used to evoke a feeling of nostalgia. Through these analyses, I engage with a notion of nostalgic filmmaking and suggest a larger discourse on the connection between cinema and memory within this product of Japanese popular culture.

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CHAPTER I:

INTRODUCTION: THE MISSING UNCLE

Mistuo (played by Hidetaka Yoshioka) is a single father living in Tokyo with his daughter Yuri (played by Hiyori Sakurada). Earlier, Mitsuo had a chance encounter with his high school sweetheart Izumi (played by Kumiko Gotō) after over twenty years and accompanied her to visit her dying father and spiteful mother. He and Yuri having a sleepover at his parent's house, his childhood home. Yuri is excited, rolling around on the futon over tatami mats in the bedroom in the background with Mitsuo's mother Sakura (played by Baishō Chieko), while his father Hiroshi (played by Maeda Gin) offers Mitsuo a beer. They look like the picture of a tightly-knit Japanese family. However, Mitsuo is dejected, having witnessed how disconnected he and Izumi are from each other. An image of his previous love's tearful face flashes on screen, interrupted by Yuri joking about her father's snoring. Mitsuo's father Hiroshi furthers this by saying "You still do that? Just like when you were a child." As the camera remains on the single father drinking beer, Mitsuo begins reflecting on his family's troubles in voice over: "I've often fought with my father. Ran away, too. More than one or two times." As his father pours him a beer, Mitsuo continues to reminisce about past times "When I did, the one who would always find me and always take my side was my uncle." Sentimental music begins playing. As Mitsuo sits down and shares a beer with his father, he downs the entire glass in one go as his voice over continues, "If he was here right now, I'd tell him how sad I feel, and how much I will miss Izumi when I say goodbye to her tomorrow." Just as Mistuo finishes his beer, a large man with a square face materializes on the stairs behind him, looking sorrowful, too. His tan hat and suit are

glaringly outdated. Mitsuo looks at the empty room behind him, still wallowing in his thoughts, and as this ghost vanishes he turns back a second time, just missing that familiar figure.¹

The man that appears behind Mitsuo is Kurama Torajirō, commonly known as “Tora-san,” a playful abbreviation of his first name plus the suffix -san, who is played by comedian Atsumi Kiyoshi (1926-1996). This scene is from the 2019 film of director Yamada Yōji’s enormously popular *It’s Tough being a Man (Otoko wa tsurai yo)* series, released in the United States with a limited film festival run as *Tora-san: Wish You Were Here (Otoko wa tsurai yo okaeri Tora-san, hereafter Wish You Were Here)*, that evokes a nostalgic sentiment for Tora-san twenty-three years after Atsumi’s passing. *Wish You Were Here* is the fiftieth film in the *It’s Tough Being a Man* franchise, the world’s longest film series to feature the same director (Yamada) and main actor (Atsumi). Atsumi played Tora-san in all forty-nine of the series’ previous films, holding the role between 1969 until his death in 1996; one film, *Tora-san’s Tropical Fever Special Edition*,² was released posthumously. The *It’s Tough Being a Man* series is often referred colloquially as the “*Tora-san* series” thanks to the Atsumi’s iconic and beloved character who drives the films’ narratives and propels its formula. Hereafter, I adopt this usage.

The *Tora-san* series is a set of highly sentimental but lighthearted dramas that depict themes of family, hometown, and the emotional connection between people. In each film, Tora-san, the kind-hearted vagabond, returns to his hometown, the downtown Tokyo neighborhood of Shibamata, and reunites with his family. He later leaves again to go on a journey, in part because he feels he has let his family down but largely to help a female love interest in trouble. Tora-

¹ *Otoko wa tsurai yo okaeri Tora-san* [Tora-san, Wish You Were Here]. Directed by Yōji Yamada (Shōchiku, 2019), 1:39:03 to 1:41:18.

² *Otoko wa tsurai yo: Torajirō haibisukasu no hana tokubetsu hen* [Tora-san’s Tropical Fever Special Edition]. Directed by Yōji Yamada (Shōchiku, 1997).

san's love interests are called "Madonnas" in the series and are played by famous actresses and singers, as will be explained later. After a series of humorous escapades and journeys through Japan, Tora-san succeeds in rescuing the Madonna, but the Madonna can never start a romantic relationship or even a family with Tora-san, due to her own reasons and responsibilities. Thanks to the films' formulaic structure, frequent releases, strongly defined characters, and Atsumi's infectious comedic performance, the *Tora-san* series garnered a mass following during its heyday. The *Tora-san* series became one of the most beloved cinematic franchises in postwar Japan and Tora-san himself a cultural icon, having reportedly been seen over eighty million times, earning over ninety billion yen by the forty-ninth installment. It's thanks to these successes that the *Tora-san* series and its main character became a staple cultural product during its time.

In this thesis, I analyze how the *Tora-san* series depicts nostalgia for the 1960s through 1990s, or the Shōwa forties through sixties, and how it reflects many of the social, economic, and cultural transformations that occurred at this time, including the "high-growth era," when Japan's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) increased by a staggeringly average of 9.2 percent between 1956 and 1973, and still held an average of 4.3 percent during the rising oil prices during the 1970s.³ During this time, being a regularly employed worker earning a monthly salary, often called a "salaryman" was a norm for men in Japanese cities. Images of a good life, premised on owning household commodities such as the "three treasures" of a washing machine, a refrigerator, and a television, were promoted by film, television programs, advertising, and other forms of popular culture. Concurrently, the high-growth era was a time of inequities, debates, and protests. For

³ Peter Frost, "Postwar Japan, 1952-1989" About Japan, Japan Society (2003) Accessed April 11, 2022. http://aboutjapan.japansociety.org/content.cfm/postwar_japan_1952-1989.

example, the Zengakuren protested the renewal of the security treaty with the United States (AMPO); one of its final largescale protests was held in 1969, coincidentally the year of the first *Tora-san* film, simply titled *It's Tough Being a Man*.⁴ *Tora-san* arrives onto Japanese screens at a time when the nation seemed to have recovered from the effects of the war and its aftermath. The *Tora-san* series depicts other events of the high-growth era and the bubble economy era (1986-1991) through a figure that carries a nostalgic image of Japan's past figures, continuing until 1996 where *Tora-san* is last seen helping the survivors of the Great Hanshin Earthquake of 1995.⁵

Wish You Were Here engages with the cinematic memories of the historical time period covered by the *Tora-san* series through conveying nostalgia for the character *Tora-san*. The appearance of *Tora-san* in *Wish You Were Here*, in scenes such as the one described above, is not as a ghost or a specter, a figment of the past returning to the present to look over the lives of his family in his absence. Rather, within the narrative of the film, he becomes representative for the memories and sentiments promoted in popular culture at the time. When characters in the film remember *Tora-san*, they also remember the past as represented by the previous films; they are nostalgic for both their lovable family member and an idealized time of national growth and imagined unity. Although, this is not nostalgia as a desire to return to the past, instead, for Mitsuo in particular, the memories of Japan's growth and unity are ironically represented by *Tora-san*, who was a vagabond rather than a salaryman, encouraging him to look toward the future and to find his own way forward as a worker and a family member. This form of nostalgia is similar to that of Millie Creighton, who describes the process as "looks backwards rather than

⁴ *Otoko wa tsurai yo* [It's Tough Being a Man]. Directed by Yōji Yamada (Shōchiku, 1969).

⁵ *Tora-san* appears with the real Prime Minister Murayama Tomiichi (in office 1994-1996) in the forty-eighth film, *Tora-san to the Rescue*.

forwards for the familiar rather than the novel, for certainty rather than discovery.”⁶ To evoke this nostalgia in *Wish You Were Here*, Yamada uses a number of cinematic techniques such as flashbacks, interjecting into the chronological sequence of events an event from before the narrative.

Yamada is one of Japan’s most celebrated film directors, largely known for family-oriented dramas or gentle comedies grounded in Japanese daily life through films such as *The Yellow Handkerchief*⁷ and *A Class to Remember*,⁸ both winners of the Japan Academy Film Awards.⁹ Yamada did not achieve international recognition until his film *The Twilight Samurai*,¹⁰ part of his Samurai Trilogy,¹¹ in part due to the amount of cultural knowledge needed to appreciate his films. Yamada has won awards for directing and writing screenplays for the *Tora-san* series, but none of the films have won Picture of the Year from the Japanese Film Academy. Yamada began making films during the “golden age of Japanese cinema” of the 1960s at Shōchiku’s Ōfuna Studio, the production studio that produced many family dramas of Ozu Yasujiro’s, a director whom Yamada admired and who inspired in his films.¹² Yamada has spent almost all of his career with Shōchiku, however *Tora-san* did not originally begin as a Shōchiku film, instead as a television drama produced by Fuji Television.

⁶ Millie Creighton, “Consuming Rural Japan: The Marketing of Tradition and Nostalgia in the Japanese Travel Industry.” *Ethnology* 36, no. 3 (1997): 242.

⁷ *Shiawase no kiroi hankachi* [The Yellow Handkerchief]. Directed by Yōji Yamada (Shōchiku 1977).

⁸ *Gakkō* [A Class to Remember] Directed by Yōji Yamada (Shōchiku, 1993).

⁹ *The Yellow Handkerchief* won 6 awards at the inaugural Awards ceremony in 1977, in addition two additional awards given to Yamada for direction and screenplay of *Tora-san*. *A Class to Remember* won four awards at the seventeenth ceremony in 1993.

¹⁰ *Tasogare seibei* [The Twilight Samurai], Directed by Yōji Yamada (Shōchiku, 2002).

¹¹ The other two films are: *The Hidden Blade* (2004) and *Love and Honor* (2006), both directed by Yamada at Shōchiku as well.

¹² Yamada even remade Ozu’s most acclaimed film *Tokyo Story* (1953) sixty years later as *Tokyo Family* (2013).

As I will argue, in *Wish You Were Here* Yamada uses the cinematic form to instill nostalgia in three forms. First, through filmic language, Yamada associates memories of Tora-san in the previous forty-nine films with memories of Japan's growth, creating a cinematic image that combines Tora-san's iconic character with strong depictions of family and neighborhood despite differences and inequities that existed in historical reality. Secondly, this nostalgia is entirely self-referential, referring directly to the previous films of the *Tora-san* series. The protagonist Mitsuo embarks on a journey that resembles Tora-san's, celebrating the icon and beginning his own metaphorical one. On this journey, Mitsuo and the other characters reminisce about Tora-san. However, critically, Yamada includes the scenes from previous films inserted into *Wish You Were Here* as characters' memories, scenes that are digitally restored in high quality to fit in visually with the rest of the film. In selecting preexisting scenes from previous films as the characters' memories, these memories are not solely localized to the world of the film. Fans of the *Tora-san* series recognize these scenes as they have experienced them as well, prompting a secondary nostalgia. The third engagement with nostalgia is within cinematic craft itself. Yamada's careful use of cinematic techniques invokes a feeling of nostalgia in viewers the film that delivers the nostalgic experience garnered by the previous two forms. These, in combination with the original story, allows the film to be experienced by younger generations who did not grow up seeing the *Tora-san* series. However, Yamada aims the film primarily at viewers who are already fans of the *Tora-san* series. I argue that *Wish You Were Here* combines the historic image cultivated by the films with the cinematic techniques of nostalgia in order to revive the cultural icon that is Tora-san.

Understanding the history of the *Tora-san* series, its director and main character are pivotal in understanding the role of nostalgia in the films. Thus, I begin this thesis with a brief

history of the series. Then, I divide the analysis into three parts that reflect the three forms of nostalgia described above. First, I discuss how Tora-san is an ironic figure of nostalgia representing a vision of a unified Japan devoted to national growth. Second, I describe the series' narrative, themes, characters, and tropes to uncover the self-referentiality of *Wish You Were Here*. This section will discuss how the film celebrates the *Tora-san* series by being both the fiftieth installment of the series as well as by updating the narrative to ground the fictional world in 2019. Finally, I discuss nostalgia as a mechanic of filmmaking, analyzing how the cinematic techniques of nostalgia are deployed in *Wish You Were Here*. This thesis utilizes an interdisciplinary approach steeped in film studies, cultural studies, and history. My analysis of the film is premised on close reading to keep the discussion grounded within the cinematic text, and focus on how the film engages with a larger set of discourses. Studies of Tora-san are few in English language scholarship, usually only brought up as a dominant force within Japanese popular culture, with a large contribution to its recognition provided by film critics Mark Schilling and James Bailey, as well as the articles exploring the series' identity by Matoush and Torrance. Although here, I am more concerned with the nostalgic effect generated by *Wish You Were Here* and the use of cinema to “revive” a man who passed away over twenty years ago. This film, whose creation has astonished even Yamada himself,¹³ is a product of the cultural and cinematic histories of a particular period of time, localized in its dedication to one series of films yet broad in its evocation of a nostalgic experience.

¹³ Yamada's own words were: “We made a film made that until now has not been realized”, to which is continued as “a miracle film that goes beyond imagination” in the film's promotion <https://www.cinemaclassics.jp/tora-san/movie50/introstory/#intro>.

CHAPTER II:

THE GENESIS OF *TORA-SAN*

The world of the *Tora-san* series was sparked by the combination of both Yamada's Japanese and French influences, in addition to Atsumi's deep engagement with his character. The consistent running of the series for over twenty years allowed Yamada to both iterate and experiment, shaping his career as a director and writer, and gaining recognition for his work on *Tora-san*. Yamada is famously known to compare himself to a chef of soba buckwheat noodles, consistently serving bowl after bowl of soup in a dedicated craft.¹⁴ Even with his successes outside of *Tora-san*, Yamada has always remained with Shōchiku studio, with the *Tora-san* series his key identifying work. Yamada's role in the series is pivotal as he was involved with every installment of the *Tora-san* series since its inception, though not always as its director. The genesis of *Tora-san*, both in the origins of its production, as well as the conception of its iconic protagonist, provides grounds for establishing how an image of Japan in the high-growth era has been cultivated throughout the series.

The *Tora-san* film series was inspired from a television series of the same title, also starring Atsumi, as both he and Yamada were rising figures in the newly popular television medium. Originally titled *Foolish Brother, Wise Sister*,¹⁵ the television series changed title due to marketing concerns, as Atsumi was growing success as a popular comedic actor during the 1960s. The title *It's Tough Being a Man* first appeared earlier in 1968 as the title of the final episode of

¹⁴ Mark Schilling, "Yamada Yoji Harks Back to Japanese Cinema's Golden Age," *The Asia Pacific Journal* 6, Issue 2, (February 1, 2011).

¹⁵ *Gukei Kenmei* [Foolish Brother, Wise Sister]. Directed by Junichi Kobayashi, Written by Yamada Yōji (Fuji Television, 1968-1969).

a different series, for which Yamada served as the screenwriter for.¹⁶ However, according to producer Kobayashi Shunichi, the words themselves are inspired from the lyrics of a song performed by popular Enka (Japanese folksong) singer Kitajima Saburō.¹⁷ Nevertheless, with the chance to create his own series with rising star Atsumi, Yamada sought inspiration from his youth and combined two of his greatest influences. He held an ambition to create a world with iconic and lovable characters, and thus modelled the world of *Tora-san* after French playwright Marcel Pagnol’s 1929 Marseille Trilogy which had inspired Yamada during his student days.¹⁸ Yamada believed that Pagnol’s characters and themes would adapt well into the modern Japanese setting and sought to combine the lovable characters of Pagnol with characters from *rakugo*, comedic storytelling performances that he was familiar from his student days. Yamada found direct parallels between the characters and locales of Pagnol with the world of *Tora-san* that he was creating, layering these French stage characters with elements from popular *rakugo* characters such as “Kuma-san” and “Hassan,” with an additional element from the expressions of emotions found within kabuki theatre and naniwa-bushi narrative singing.¹⁹ Thus, Yamada mixed a variety of diverse influences, from Japan and France, old and new, re-orienting them into present day downtown Tokyo in order to craft the world of *Tora-san* beginning with the television series.

¹⁶ The series is titled *Naite tamaruka*, roughly translating to *You think I Won’t Cry?* The episode titled *It’s Tough Being a Man* aired on March 31st 1968, six months before the pilot for the *It’s Tough Being a Man* series.

¹⁷ This was reported in a collection of essays by Yamada and the crew titled “*Otoko wa tsurai yo Tora-san Dokuhon.*”

¹⁸ Interestingly the character Tora-san is based on, César, began life as a film rather than a stage play, directed and written by Pagnol himself.

¹⁹ Yōji Yamada, “Yamada Yoji Kantoku no Genten Butai ‘Marius’ ga Ongakugeki ni,” interview by Youichi Uchida, *Nikkei*, March 23, 2017.

The television series aired for twenty-six episodes and ended in Tora-san's death by snakebite. However, cancellation of the popular series was met with large fan backlash. The television station received a large number of angry phone calls after Tora-san's death, prompting talks for a film adaptation. However, Shōchiku at the time was unwilling to greenlight a film based off a television series. Yamada was able to convince the Shōchiku producers to allow him to create a film, staking his career on it.²⁰ As televisions became more affordable and programming more accessible in the 1960s, audiences became more inclined to consume visual media at home instead of going out to the cinema, seemingly a threat to film productions and theaters. At this time, film studios sought new methods to continue to draw crowds by creating film franchises to emulate the serial nature of television; this effort was exemplified by Tōhō Studios' *Godzilla* films, which began to wane in popularity in the 1970s.²¹ Notable examples of film serials are the *Truck Rascals* (*Torakku Yarō*, 1975-1979), from Tōhō Studio, and the *Lone Wolf and Cub* (*Kozure Ōkami*, 1972-1974), produced by actor Shintaro Katsu. However, both of these series began to wane in popularity in keeping up with the *Tora-san* series' consistency and frequent releases. *Truck Rascals* ended with nine films produced over four years, and *Lone Wolf and Cub* turned into a television series in 1973 by a studio founded by its original author.

It's Tough Being a Man the film became an instant hit, prompting production on a sequel, *Tora-san's Cherished Mother*,²² which was also popular among film audiences. Yamada was satisfied with his work on his *Tora-san* films and stepped down from the director's seat for the

²⁰ Akita Taisaku shares this story in his collection of essays titled "*The Atsumi Kiyoshi that I Love*."

²¹ While *Godzilla* himself was undoubtedly an icon at this time, with merchandizing and advertising power, ticket sales for *Godzilla* films declined sharply.

²² *Zoku otoko wa tsurai yo* [*Tora-san's Cherished Mother*]. Directed by Yōji Yamada (Shōchiku, 1969).

following two films, *Tora-san, His Tender Love*²³ and *Tora-san's Grand Scheme*,²⁴ directed by Morisaki Azuma and Kobayashi Shunichi respectively. These were the only two films in the series that Yamada did not direct, although he still wrote the screenplays of these films. It was only after the fifth film, *Tora-san's Runaway*,²⁵ that the series became a mainstay on cinema screens, with Shōchiku's full support.²⁶ Twice a year audiences would be treated to Tora-san's travels across Japan and abroad on two installments, as well as his romantic escapades with Madonnas and, more importantly, the strong personalities of the onscreen family that always welcomed the drifter home no matter the circumstances.

Starting with the eighth film in the series *Tora-san's Love Call*,²⁷ a new *Tora-san* film was released twice a year on early August and late December, to coincide with the summer holiday and New Year's season when schools and offices were closed and people had more time to go to the cinema. This stable schedule lasted every year until 1989, after which only one film a year was released until Atsumi's death in 1996. With the consistent expected releases of *Tora-san* films each year, as well as the formulaic nature of the plot, audiences always know what to expect. However, no two films are the same and Yamada always finds a way to spin the formula to reflect the location that Tora-san finds himself in or the people finds himself with. Instead of becoming repetitive, the series always finds life in the familiarity audiences have developed for the characters, who grew and matured throughout the series. Mitsuo is born in *Tora-san's*

²³ *Otoko wa tsurai yo fuuten no Tora* [Tora-san, His Tender Love]. Directed by Morisaki Azuma (Shōchiku, 1970).

²⁴ *Shin otoko wa tsurai yo* [Tora-san's Grand Scheme]. Directed by Kobayashi Shunichi (Shōchiku, 1970).

²⁵ *Otoko wa tsurai yo boukyou hen* [Tora-san's Runaway]. Directed by Yōji Yamada (Shōchiku, 1970).

²⁶ Yōji Yamada "Tora-san 'Fukkatsu' Hisaku wa? 'Otoko wa tsurai yo' 50 Shunen" by Seiji Fukunaga, Yomiuri Newspaper, January 11, 2019.

²⁷ *Otoko wa tsurai yo Torajirō koiuta* [Tora-san's Love Call]. Directed by Yōji Yamada (Shōchiku, 1971).

Cherished Mother and grows from a child into an adult, having more of an involvement as he grows older. The frequent appearance of characters such as Lily (played by prolific actress Asaoka Ruriko), Tora-san's most frequent Madonna, as well as Izumi, provide continuity to the individualized stories of each installment. In addition, as Tora-san, Sakura, and the other core characters aged, and the question of Tora-san marrying and settling down is brought up more frequently later in the series, as Tora-san compares himself to the young Mitsuo. Despite changes in both the fictional world and in reality over the course of the series, Yamada always makes Tora-san the protagonist and the focal point of the audience's attention. Although, Atsumi's on screen personality of Tora-san was able to garner much attention despite his masculine identity seeming ironic during the time of the films' releases.

CHAPTER III:

TORA-SAN'S STRUGGLES BEING A MAN

Central to the *Tora-san* film series, and in the character that Mitsuo looks up to, is the titular Tora-san, whose performance by Atsumi embodies the gendered implications of *It's Tough Being a Man* and re-presents character traits found within Japanese stories. The creation of this character is ascribed to both Yamada and Atsumi, who are frequently given equal weight in celebrating the character. This is a result of Yamada's writing, that combines western theatrical worldbuilding with the character traits of Japanese traditional performance arts, being realized by Atsumi's affectionate and earnest performances. The performance of Tora-san that brings together these traits in cinema during the high-growth era created a particular cinematic image that used the external social and economic conditions as the film's backgrounds. In her study of the Japanese wedding industry, Ofra Goldstein-Giodini argues that cultural products are entwined with an ongoing construction of cultural identity rather than static, unchanging traditions.²⁸ As such, the cinematic image found in the *Tora-san* series is an ongoing, dynamic, and contested process, as is culture itself. This cinematic image is, in part, a product of Japan's high economic growth, as Marilyn Ivy states that "The seemingly indiscriminate cultural mixing and matching that some have taken as a hallmark of contemporary Japan becomes, in the global postmodern situation, the simple prerogative of an affluent nation."²⁹ The creation of the character of Tora-san involves that same process of cultural *mélange* afforded by the affluent status of Japan, yet Tora-san himself can be seen as anything but affluent. Within Tora-san's

²⁸ Ofra Goldstein-Gidoni, *Packaged Japaneseness: Weddings, Business, and Brides* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997).

²⁹ Marilyn Ivy, "Tradition and Difference in the Japanese Mass Media," *Public Culture Bulletin* 1, (1998): 27.

character and performance is, in fact, an ironic reflection of the high-growth era and of growing national wealth.

This cinematic image that is presented through the affective, marginal, and dutiful traveler that is Tora-san seems paradoxical, almost ironic at this time. Tora-san's performative appeal is foremost defined by his affective qualities, his highly expressive emotions, as well as the love he bears for his home, family, and romantic interests. Audiences come to see a character with contrasting emotions, and a range of exaggerated reactions to the situations within each film's storyline. Within the context of the high-growth era and subsequent bubble era,³⁰ Tora-san is seen as a contrasting image to that of the salaryman, an idealized form of corporate masculinity highly promoted during this time. In addition, Tora-san also evokes a facet of Japanese literature that is associated with traditional stories, though still existent today - that of travel literature. Tora-san is a wandering vagabond who, through the film's imagery, connects different locations in the country in his travels (*tabi*), though presents a different traveler than others found in films at this time. Through the characteristics of his affections, disparity to the salaryman, and wandering spirit, the character of Tora-san embodies a cinematic space in which a complex image of a man in the present day has been able to achieve mass appeal.

The Affections of Tora-san

On the screen, Tora-san's key defining trait and what makes him such so empathetic is his overwhelming compassion. Despite the character's numerous shortcomings and misadventures, Atsumi's earnest performance brings out a profound sense of compassion in the

³⁰ 1986-1991, a period marked by Japan's asset price bubble.

character. In the first film of the series, when entering his family home in the evening, instead of the usual greeting “*Tadaima*” meaning “I’m home,” Tora-san instead says “Thank you folks, for another day hard worked.”³¹ Yamada notes that this line was, in fact, improvised by Atsumi, where he remarks “a discovery that this was how people of the *shitamachi* (downtown) exchanged greetings when the day was over. I’m guessing that it was a phrase that had come from Atsumi-san’s upbringing.”³² Yamada was struck by the personal experience Atsumi, who grew up in a *shitamachi*, had brought to Tora-san in order root him in the downtown neighborhood of Shibamata with more realism.

Tora-san is never afraid to express his emotions and always gives an authentic display of his feelings throughout the series. This emotionally open and expressive character type allows him a certain appeal in his exaggeration of contrasting emotions. Tora-san always has two conflicting sides. He is a character who is composed of both heroism and pathos, both jovial yet sorrowful, angry yet kind, close but distant, always falling in love but never gets the woman. Tora-san is a loud, boisterous man with a short temper, often finding himself in comedic conflicts with his family and other characters, however, his good nature and emotional sincerity touches the hearts of all who encounter him, including the audience. In each film of the series, Tora-san makes a return to his hometown of Shibamata, a downtown neighborhood of Tokyo, and reunites with his family and friends. Tora-san’s half-sister Sakura runs a *dangoya*, a rice dumpling shop with the rest of the Kurama family. As Tora-san returns home, all the Shibamata residents welcome warmly, and he reciprocates their feelings. They treat each other as an extended family, a connection that goes beyond bloodlines.

³¹ *Otoko wa tsurai yo* [It’s Tough Being a Man]. Directed by Yōji Yamada (Shōchiku, 1969).

³² Yamada Yōji and Baishō Chieko “The Modern Day Family Without Tora-san” Interview by Ikushima Jun, *Discuss Japan*, April 13, 2014.

In each film, Tora-san finds himself in a comedic conflict that involves a romantic interest, the Madonna. The Madonna is always played by a famous actress or singer at the time of the film's production.³³ Usually, each installment features a new Madonna, though Lily was Tora-san's most frequent Madonna. Lily has appeared in six *Tora-san* films, including a reprisal in *Wish You Were Here*. Tora-san and the Madonna harbor feelings for each other, but they never get together and Tora-san continues his journey alone in the end. Tora-san prides himself in a selfless confidence to aid his Madonna, yet reveals a deep vulnerability when he does not remain with her at the end of the film. He is not high class or well educated but his positive outlook, expression of genuine emotion, and love for others make Tora-san a comforting figure that kept audiences coming back to see his clumsy but heartfelt escapades.

Tora-san the Anti-Salaryman

By the time the *Tora-san* series began during the high-growth era, an image of the salarymen was becoming a dominant image of masculinity in the corporatized Japanese society. The salaryman himself is not a static figure, changing in the many states of socio-economic conditions over the years, though the archetype itself has remained entrenched in Japanese popular culture and society. During the period of high economic growth, following the accelerated industrialization and urbanization of postwar Japan, the salaryman image, in reflection of these changes, had become almost a prescribed identity, highly depicted in advertising and popular culture. As he was now additionally a family man and the head of the nuclear family, the salaryman became the model for Japanese masculinity and family structure.

³³ Some notable Madonna from the series are: Nana Kinomi, Ran Itō, Komaki Kurihara, Reiko Ōhara, and Kyōko Kagawa.

The emerging middle-class, educated salaryman is identified within his organization by qualities of loyalty, dedication, diligence, and self-sacrifice. His outfit, consumer choices, and expressions (both verbal and physical) would reflect those characteristics. Success is a key attribute of a salaryman, as well as conformity to the gender role as a suitable husband and provider for a family. However, Romit Dasgupta points out that “even at the high point of the Japan Inc. system in the 1970s, only a minority of the male workforce would have fallen within the strictest definitional parameters of the salaryman.”³⁴ This rift, between the idealized image and everyday experiences, allowed an opening for alternative forms of masculinity in the postwar era to be explored, with Tora-san rising as one of its major incarnations.

Dasgupta calls upon Tora-san as a counter-example to the salaryman brand of masculinity.³⁵ As the title *It's Tough Being a Man* suggests, a certain image of masculinity is implied within the films' main character and storylines that Tora-san struggles with.³⁶ The predominant mode of masculinity during this period was interconnected with the figure of the salaryman, who was propped up as the ideal, hegemonic form of masculinity in social and economic discourses and proliferated in popular culture. Clearly, Tora-san does not subscribe to the salaryman masculinity. His on-screen performance of open and affectionate attitudes contrasts with the image of the diligent, work-oriented performance of the salaryman at the time. As established earlier, Tora-san is a hopeless lover rather than a providing father. While he is able to touch the hearts of his Madonna with his kindness, he is never able to express these particular feelings or reciprocate hers. As such, he is unable to start his own family at any point

³⁴ Romit Dasgupta, “Snapshots of Shōwa (CE 1926-89) and PostShōwa Japan Through Salaryman Articulations,” *Asia Pacific Perspectives* v15n1, 41.

³⁵ Dasgupta, “Snapshots of Shōwa (CE 1926-89) and PostShōwa Japan Through Salaryman Articulations,” 41.

³⁶ In addition, later Tora-san films ran in theatres along a popular film series depicting salarymen: *Salaryman's Seminar* (*Saraiman Senka*, 1995-1997).

in the series, despite the pleas of Sakura. In combination with his inconsistent source of income, Tora-san's masculinity clashes with the expectations of men becoming breadwinners and *daidokubashira*, the central pillar of the household. Mark Schilling goes as far as calling Tora-san "a victim of the sexual conventions imposed by a rigidly hierarchical, credential-worshipping society."³⁷ Tora-san holds a far different social status and possesses little merit compared to the expected pedigree of the typical salaryman.

Tora-san is neither a degree holder, nor part of the emerging middle-class of postwar Japan. There is a generation gap between him and the ideal image of salaryman of the time, entrenched within the economic and political ethos of postwar reforms and high-growth. Born just after the war and entering their careers as the economic reforms began taking effect, this generation is what Dasgupta calls "the foot soldiers of the 'Japan Inc.' partnership between the ruling LDP, big business, and bureaucracy."³⁸ Conversely, Tora-san is already middle aged by the time the series began in 1969, part of the first generation of the Shōwa era in the prewar and as a *tekiya*, he was not much higher on the social ladder than a *yakuza* or gambler. Additionally, the circumstance of Tora-san's birth is a wound he carries with him everywhere. In the world of the series, Tora-san is an illegitimate child, born from an illicit relationship between his gambler father and a geisha from Kyoto. He never knew his parents, instead growing up with his half-sister Sakura in the home of his aunt and uncle who he affectionally calls *obā-chan* and *oi-chan*.³⁹ While he does not keep his background a secret, Tora-san is still sensitive about it, and is one of the reasons he hesitates when his relationship with a Madonna takes a serious turn. Unlike

³⁷ Mark Schilling. "Into the Heartland with Tora-San," in *Japan Pop! : Inside the World of Japanese Popular Culture*, ed. Timothy J Craig (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2000) 249.

³⁸ Dasgupta, "Snapshots of Shōwa (CE 1926-89) and PostShōwa Japan Through Salaryman Articulations," 39.

³⁹ Tora-san's father passed away before the series began. He does reunite with his mother however in the second film, *Tora-san's Cherished Mother*.

a Hollywood film, where the boy on the other side of the tracks can win over the girl of his dreams, Tora-san does not achieve a class transgressive romance. However, Tora-san is not admonished for a perceived undesirability in the high-growth society of the time, instead his honest and selfless desire to help others rewards him with a noble sense of satisfaction derived from the emotional bond formed during that film's events. That is enough for Tora-san, his pride and vulnerability keeping him from going further. Though, with Lily he shares a slightly different connection, he sees a kindred spirit in her. In the eleventh film of the series, he says to her "come to think of it, you are a wanderer (*tabibito*) just like me."⁴⁰ Tora-san and Lily both seem at the margins of this salaryman society, wandering the country like vagabonds, searching for their own place in the corporatized society of high-growth era and later bubble era Japan.

Tora-san, the Wandering Spirit

Tora-san's identity as a traveler additionally allows him another mode of engagement as a central figure of the series, building on his alternative masculinity from the salaryman during this period. At the start of each film, Tora-san gives a self-introduction in which, along with a declaration of his identification with his hometown of Shibamata, he claims "people refer to me as Tora-san the vagabond" (*Hito yonde fūten no Tora to hasshimasu*). Tora-san's identity as a *fūten* is given as a cause of his drifter status, returning from and setting out on another journey in each film. Tora-san travels take him across a series of scenic locations across the islands of Japan and in two installments, abroad.⁴¹ Sakura and the other residents of Shibamata frequently express

⁴⁰ *Otoko wa tsurai yo: Torajirō wasurenagusa* [Tora-san's Forget Me Not]. Directed by Yōji Yamada (Shōchiku, 1973).

⁴¹ Tora-san travels to Arizona in *Tora-san's Dream of Spring* and to Vienna in *Tora-san Goes to Vienna*.

frustration in the inability to contact the wanderer unless he is physically present with them. However, instead of admonishing him on his returns, Sakura instead cherishes the time they have together, as she never knows how long he will stay. Tora-san never assumes the role of central figure of the family like that of the salaryman, or even considers it, yet his dutiful dedication to his family remains a constant force to his character despite his impermanence with them. Yamada in these stories allows audiences to cherish fleeting moments with families, however good or bad, instead of longing for what could be. As Tora-san himself says in the seventeenth film, “I’m always the cause of quarrels at home. Though Sakura, when I think about those moments is when I come home.”⁴² Tora-san’s instability as a vagabond, always moving from place to place rather than commuting between a home and workplace, is ironic given the stability of the films and their themes. However, over time, Tora-san’s journeys (*tabi*) themselves are remembered as a constant in the series.

From the top of Hokkaido to the islands of Okinawa, viewers are taken along on the travels of Tora-san during the films. Audiences are cinematically taken to scenic locations around the nation. In total, Tora-san has visited every prefecture in Japan, including a number of remote islands. Tora-san’s trademark as a traveler is celebrated today through the official Tora-san website.⁴³ Curated by Shōchiku Films under the label “Cinema Classics,” the *Tora-san* website not only catalogues the films of the series, but offers an opportunity for fans to engage in their nostalgia for the series in a visually engaging way. Along with information about each film’s release, shopping locations for DVDs, the list of Madonnas and their actresses, as well as the guest cast, this website features an interactive map of Japan. This map is decorated with

⁴²*Otoko wa tsurai yo: Torajirō yūyake koyake* [Tora-san’s Sunrise and Sunset]. Directed by Yōji Yamada (Shōchiku, 1976).

⁴³ “Cinema Classics: Otoko wa tsurai yo,” Shōchiku Studio, <https://www.cinemaclassics.jp/tora-san/>.

nodes representing each of the locations that Tora-san has visited, organized by Japan's six major regions. Each node links to a dedicated page for the selected location. Headed by a wide angle shot from the representative film, these pages offer a brief description about the location, followed crucially by an easy-to-follow summary of Tora-san's journey (*tabi*) into and out of that particular location. Only then is the representative film revealed, along with links to nearby locations Tora-san has been to. Importantly, the images used are not photographs of the locations, but instead shots taken from the films, a snapshot of what these places looked like during the time of the films. The images used to represent the locations are as they were seen in the films, binding Tora-san to various locations around Japan. The emphasis on Tora-san's journey, placed on the website, placed along series defining features such as films and Madonnas, shows how important that aspect is to him. Tora-san's travels and *tabi* associates the cinematography of beautiful landmarks and locations of Japan with the character, although, as Schilling notes "the cinematic tourism did not feel forced - Tora-san belonged to those places, with those people."⁴⁴ In the films, Tora-san's travels to certain locations always felt natural, and he always managed to fit in and find connections with local residents wherever he went. Although his identity as a traveler resembles those seen in *tabimono* films, films that borrow from the image of the traveler from Edo period popular fiction, Tora-san stands apart from them as well.

Like Tora-san, the travelers of Edo period popular fiction are identified by their journey, traveling from place to place, living off the kindness of others. In urban Japan, the figure of the *tabibito* has become a rarity, but whose image is kept on in film and other forms of popular culture. Examples include Hasegawa Shin's (1884-1963) *matatabi mono*, a series of period literature and film about Edo period samurai and gamblers featuring iconic protagonists, or

⁴⁴ Schilling, "Into the Heartland with Tora-san," 252.

Nikkatsu's *Wataridori* series (1959-1962) starring Akira Kobayashi.⁴⁵ However, these series portray the wanderer figure far differently to the *Tora-san* series. Toby Matoush extends this contrast by proposing that the *Tora-san* films parody the *matatabi mono*.⁴⁶ The *matatabi mono* films casts the wandering traveler as an Edo period samurai or gambler, engaging in *chambara* sword fighting. While *Tora-san*'s frequent use of phrases such as "baka yaro" does at times resemble the gambler in his speech and attitude, he is not skilled at swordplay, instead he uses his words to engage with others. Matoush compares *Tora-san* to the figure found in *matatabi mono* by saying "he is, rather than a mythically handsome and heroic symbol of masculinity, a bumbling clumsy fool, neither handsome nor young. Instead of scaring people, he makes them laugh."⁴⁷ The *Wataridori* series is a modern gangster series from Nikkatsu studio, taking influence from the *matatabi mono* yet mixes it with the American Western. Nikkatsu action films are known for a high degree of hybridity, drawing from an array of stylistic conventions, aesthetics, genres, and themes, the result of which is referred to by scholars as "action without nationality."⁴⁸ Films like the *Wataridori* series functioned to "diffuse the nation,"⁴⁹ portraying an "onscreen world that was at once alien and familiar to viewers at large."⁵⁰ The series goes as far as portraying Hokkaido, Japan's northern island, as the frontier and the indigenous Ainu people as the foreign Other. Conversely, *Tora-san*'s journey does not subscribe to either of these

⁴⁵ The series begins with *The Rambling Guitarist* (1959) and spanned eight films. Asaoka Ruriko played Kobayashi's "Madonna" in the film.

⁴⁶ Toby Matoush "Nostalgia, The Search for Japanese Identity, and *Tora-san* as Cultural Icon," *Asian Cinema*, Volume 18, Number 2 (2007): 247.

⁴⁷ Matoush "Nostalgia, The Search for Japanese Identity, and *Tora-san* as Cultural Icon," 248.

⁴⁸ Hiroshi Kitamura, "Shoot-Out in Hokkaido: The "Wanderer" (*Wataridori*) Series and the Politics of Transnationality." In *Transnational Asian Identities in Pan-Pacific Cinemas: the Reel Asian Exchange*, ed. Philippa Gates, and Lisa Funnell (New York: Routledge, 2012), 36.

⁴⁹ Kitamura, "Shoot-Out in Hokkaido," 36.

⁵⁰ Kitamura, "Shoot-Out in Hokkaido," 39.

depictions. No part of Japan is on the periphery, as Tora-san finds connections in all corners of the nation, making friends and falling in love.

Within Tora-san's comic fumbles throughout the series, Yamada does allow the character a certain depth, which results in some of the series' strongest moments of sentimentalism. Tora-san is also known for his words, made memorable by the combination of his goofy but sincere delivery with Yamada's clever and touching writing. There are numerous collections of Tora-san's quotes published over the years, including on the official website, which curates a collection of the vagabond's wise sayings and advice over the course of the series.⁵¹ In *Wish You Were Here*, Tora-san's wise words are recalled as Sakura asks Mitsuo if he has had men's talk with his father. He says he hasn't since he's had his uncle. Then, Yamada inserts a cinematic memory from the thirty-ninth film when Mitsuo asked his uncle "What do people live for?" Tora-san responds by grunting, but after a moment to think he responds with "In life, there are times when a man feels glad he was born. We live for them, don't we?"⁵²

Tora-san, the Dutiful Being

In the background of Tora-san's anti-salaryman performance are remnants of the Japanese opposing character traits of *giri* and *ninjō*, often found in Edo period Japanese popular fiction and samurai films. *Giri* describes one's obligation to act according to the rules of society or social relationships, whereas *ninjō* refers to the human feelings of desire. Narratives that employ *giri* and *ninjō* are stories in which one's inner desires come into conflict with a character's social responsibility, bringing dramatic tension and a moral message. Often *giri* ends

⁵¹ <https://www.cinemaclassics.jp/tora-san/scene/#sec5>.

⁵² *Tora-san, Wish You Were Here*, 00:25:42 to 00:27:01 (in Reference to *Tora-san Plays Daddy*).

up as the dominant force, and represents a maintaining of the status quo within society or community in the moment. Salarymen can be seen as champions of *giri* in their everyday expectations from their companies, families, as well as society at large. They are prompted as the ones to uphold the image of Japan's corporatization and wealth at this time, dutifully adhering to the ideal image of the hard-working family man. Yet, while at first it may seem that the free-spirited vagabond Tora-san makes a strong claim for *ninjō* with his abandonment of expected social obligations, his sense of *giri* is arguably stronger than even that of the salarymen. Tora-san's actions are fueled by his emotional desires; he is straightforward with expressing what he wants and does not hesitate in expressing how he feels. He is free in visiting the beautiful and well known landmarks around Japan and always continues his own journey at the end of installments. Yet, he always feels an obligation to helping the people he encounters, unaffected by their social statuses whether they be other wanderers, salarymen, or even the prime minister himself. For example, in the twenty-sixth film of the series, while wandering around Hokkaido, Tora-san meets Sumire, the daughter of another vagabond who has passed away. When he hears Sumire's wish to go to Tokyo and finish school and find a job, he brings her home to Shibamata, lets her stay in his room, helps her register at night school, and watches guard while she is there.⁵³ Due to the romantic nature of Tora-san, one might assume he has ulterior motives, but between his foolishness and strong sense of duty towards Sumire and her father's wishes, that would never even be a consideration.

As stated earlier while he jokes about it, Tora-san is withheld by a concern for the circumstances of his birth when it comes to love. He, in fact, feels that it is a great obstacle, feeling a responsibility when staying with his Madonna and to his family. Tora-san's feelings

⁵³ *Otoko wa tsurai yo: Torajirō kamome uta* [Foster Daddy, Tora!]. Directed by Yōji Yamada (Shōchiku, 1980).

towards his family are some of the strongest in the franchise, as he feels a sense of pride of being part of such a warm and welcoming family, but also a sense of shame by not being with them. Tora-san's affections to his family are unfaltering and despite the fights and escapes he has with them, Yamada and Atsumi always assure audiences that those moments are born out of feelings of respect and love, rather than difference and hate. While Tora-san defies the salaryman of the high-growth and bubble economy eras, he still possesses a sense of *giri* towards his family, willing to fight both for and protect them in his own peculiar ways. Even his journeys and breakups are, in part, a result of his *giri* as he is conscious of his tendency to fight with his family and of his own social position. Tora-san's defiance to the salaryman identity is revisited in the character of Mitsuo who, inspired by his uncle, has quit his job as a salaryman to pursue a literary career, and begins to research Tora-san's profession of *tekiya* early on in *Wish You Were Here*.

CHAPTER IV:

CINEMATIC IMAGES OF THE VAGABOND'S HOMETOWN

Underlying the series' appealing cinematic image of the affluent Japan, ironically presented in Tora-san's performance, is what Matoush calls an iconized search for a "lost Japan."⁵⁴ This notion is reiterated as Atsumi, in reflection of his character, has stated that "Tora-san is a guy who doesn't exist in Japan anymore."⁵⁵ Tora-san's vagabond identity, that couples with his profession as a salesman and his identification with his hometown, signifies a figure in Japanese culture that, while fictional, is one that feels lost but still fondly remembered. Through the big screen, audiences are able to imagine interacting with a figure like Tora-san, traveling across Japan selling goods and wares on the streets. However, there still remains a distinct feeling evoked in the films that he inhabits spaces that are lost in present day Japan, spaces that are pushed to the margins of the technologically advanced and busy every day. Tora-san aptly falls under Marilyn Ivy's description of the vanishing, which she defines as "(dis)embodies in its gerund form the movement of something passing away, gone but not quite, suspended between presence and absence, or absenting."⁵⁶ Traces of vanishing figures such as the *tekiya* salesmen or the characteristics of the *shitamachi* downtown have not completely faded away in modern Japan, but still are perceived to be spectral remnants of a Japan that is vanishing when placed within the highly urban spaces of modern Tokyo of this time. Attempts to reclaim a lost sense of tradition during the period of Tora-san films came in the form of the *furusato* (hometown) boom, which sought to generate affections for a rural village-like atmosphere in urban Japan. Tora-san too

⁵⁴ Matoush "Nostalgia, The Search for Japanese Identity, and Tora-san as Cultural Icon," 243.

⁵⁵ Quoted in Schilling, "Into the Heartland with Tora-san," 254.

⁵⁶ Marilyn Ivy, *Discourses of the Vanishing*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 20.

shares these affects for his hometown, but instead places them in the downtown neighborhood of Shibamata where he grew up in his untraditional family. Carrying these signifiers, the *Tora-san* series continued through the collapse of the bubble economy, which shook the salaryman discourse, and ended after Atsumi's death in 1996.

Tora-san, the Charismatic Salesman

Unlike the salarymen, Tora-san does not dedicate his efforts to a larger institution or organization that he must remain loyal to. Instead, he is unemployed, always single, and travels freely across Japan instead of commuting to an office. Tora-san works instead as a *tekiya*, a hawker, selling small wares and goods wherever he ends up. *Tekiya* were itinerant merchants that are associated with traditional cultural events such as local festivals or religious events. Since the Edo period, they would travel the countryside of Japan, setting up stalls at festivals and open markets to sell a variety of common goods and food, typically of varying quality. Yet they often operated independent of the law and, along with the *bakuto* (gamblers), were the origins of many Yakuza organized crime groups. As a result, the *tekiya* sport a number of the same visual markers as the Yakuza members do such as tattoos, sunglasses, and a thuggish attitude.⁵⁷ Within the *Tora-san* series, Tora-san adopts the thuggish attitude, some of the language, and hawking trade of the *tekiya*, as well as the clothing style. Tora-san's iconic outfit consists of a mid-sleeved blue shirt, with a haramaki (Japanese waistcloth) around his waist, a staple of the *tekiya*. This outfit is completed by a checkered brown hat, jacket, and his iconic battered leather briefcase. Tora-san wears clothing more reminiscent of prewar Japan and the roaming *tekiya* associated

⁵⁷ Alan Gleason, "Tekiya: Hitomi Watanabe's Study of a Subculture" Artscape Japan, November 2017, <https://artscape.jp/artscape/eng/ht/1712.html>.

with traditional events, rather than the regulated formal suits that would be typical of a salaryman during the postwar period. The consistency of Tora-san's outfit in every film with very few variations has allowed his look to become such an identifying feature of the franchise that it is included as a display at the Tora-san museum in Shibamata.⁵⁸

Scenes of Tora-san's hawking are a key highlight in every film, elevated by Atsumi's thunderous and charismatic voice as well as his exaggerated facial and body expressions. In these scenes, Atsumi performs a particular form of hawking known as *tankabai*. This term refers to the art of conversational storytelling that *tekiya* use to draw in customers and sell them regular everyday goods. *Tankabai* relies on wordplay, tempo, and captivating stories to lure audiences into purchasing rather ordinary wares. In the *Tora-san* series, Yamada once again brings in his influence from iconic stories from Rakugo in Tora-san's *tankabai* performances. In particular, Tora-san's iconic *tankabai* is reminiscent of the story of "Toad's Oil" (*Gama no Abura*) which tells the story of a stall-keeper trying to sell Toad's Oil, a legendary curative made out of a toad's sweat from Mount Tsukuba. This is similar to the western tradition of the travelling salesmen of snake oil in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In addition, like with Tora-san's journeys, information about his *tankabai* is available on the website for every film of the series. Tora-san's Rakugo infused sales method echoes of vanishing traditions that may only be revisited during shrine festivals or similar events. His identity as a *tekiya* reminds viewers of the itinerant shopkeepers who appeared during these festivals and other cultural events. Tora-san as the *tekiya* serves as an onscreen signifier of vanishing Japanese celebrations and figures falling to the margins of culture during the time of urbanization. However, unlike the *tekiya* who are part of

⁵⁸ Occasionally Tora-san wears a slightly different suit, or forgoes the jacket, with the biggest outfit change occurs when he becomes a Buddhist monk in the thirty-second film *Tora-san Goes Religious?* (1983).

organized groups, Tora-san operates independently, always traveling alone or with a single aid.⁵⁹ Without an organization or corporation to adhere to, Tora-san's loyalty is reserved explicitly towards his family and to his downtown neighborhood of Shibamata, which contains additional vanishing spaces that are formative to the series' distinct image.

The Downtown Nostalgia of Shibamata

Tora-san's iconic self-introduction, which plays before the opening musical number in every film, begins with a declaration of his birthplace. The full introduction goes: "I was born and bred in Shibamata, Katsushika. Baptized in Taishakuten temple. Last name Kurama, first Torajirō. People call me 'Tora-san the vagabond.'" Before even naming himself, Tora-san states the place where he was born and raised, expressing feelings of identification with and natural connection to his hometown of Shibamata. This close association Tora-san has with his place of birth is one of the main driving emotions behind the series as a whole. The affection Tora-san has for Shibamata is visually displayed as he physically returns to his birthplace during every film and expresses longing for it when he is away. On the banks of the Edogawa river, Shibamata is a suburb located on the eastern edge of Katsushika ward, in northeastern Tokyo. Despite it being within the municipal boundaries of Tokyo, Shibamata is a considerable distance from the city's central areas, taking about forty-five minutes from Tokyo Station by train. Its distance from the metropolis and its distinct locality allows Shibamata to act as a distinct subsection of Tokyo and, its depiction in the series, drawing on the spatial geography of Paul Waley in this chapter, can be considered quintessential *shitamachi*. This location serves as the series' central location,

⁵⁹ Tora-san has only had two travelling companions over the series, Noboru Kawamata and Ponshū played by Taisaku Akino and Keiroku Seki respectively.

identified by Tora-san's hometown and place of birth. Visitors to Shibamata today are greeted by a life-sized bronze statue of Tora-san as they exit from the station, dedicated to the character's deep association with the town, despite neither Atsumi nor Yamada being from there. Within walking distance from the station is Taishakuten Sandō, the paved shopping street that served as the external stage for the iconic dumpling shop of the Kurama family, named for the temple at the end of the street. This shopping street where the dumpling shop is located in, is a space that harbored idealized images of a close-knit friendly neighborhood with colorful characters that form an extended family and markers of an Edo period past. The close imagery with these landmarks of the *shitamachi* (downtown) of Shibamata is brought out by the blending identities of Atsumi and Tora-san.

In the previous chapter, I have mentioned how Yamada attributes some of Atsumi's improvisations as the way that the people in the *shitamachi* greet each other. *Shitamachi* dotted the Eastern outskirts of the city center during the Edo period and was the home to communities of various crafts and trades. The *shitamachi*, as described by Waley, "was closely associated with the people who lived there and whose alleged attributes imparted to the location its rich texture of social imagery."⁶⁰ The residents of the *shitamachi*, helped define Edo identities in the social imaginary, and they would take pride in that, self-identifying as "Edokko," or "Edo boy." "Edokko" embodied "traits of rebelliousness and bravado associated with the more impulsive, rough and independent ways,"⁶¹ an exaggeration that is reminiscent of the acting style of *kabuki* theatre. Schilling attributes these personality traits to Tora-san, referring to him an "Edokko," describing him by saying: "he may have a short fuse, an empty wallet, a quick tongue, and a

⁶⁰ Paul Waley, "Moving the Margins of Tokyo." *Urban Studies*, vol. 39, no. 9 (Aug. 2002): 1535.

⁶¹ Waley, "Moving in the Margins of Tokyo," 1536.

happy-go-lucky approach to life, but he is also religiously faithful to the Edokko ethic of *giri ninjō*.⁶² Schilling attributes Tora-san's interpretation of *giri* and *ninjo* as an "ethic" of the Edokko, however, here *giri* and *ninjo* act more as an archetype for the character, giving him a relatable depth, rather than a set of morals to establish him as an Edokko. Tora-san's conflict of *giri* and *ninjo* is most effective as a response to the corporatizing world of high-growth and bubble era Japan, in defiance of the Salaryman, rather than a return to pre-modern codes. What the *Tora-san* series does instead is revive the atmosphere of the *shitamachi* neighborhoods in its depiction of the Taishakuten Sandō.

Schilling believes that *shitamachi* in the modern era retain some of their Edo era charms, occasionally as the physical structures survived through the destructions of the war, but more commonly from the commercialization of signifiers of their Edo period localities. The *Tora-san* series utilizes the nostalgic possibilities of the commercial signifiers found within Shibamata to bolster Tora-san's identification with his hometown. The Toraya house, where Sakura lives and works, sells *kusadango*, rice dumplings made with mugwort, a local specialty of Shibamata. The Toraya house, as well as the neighboring Takagiya house, that were used as the exterior locations of the Kuramaya house in the series have become iconic locations that sell Shibamata's image through the *kusadango*.⁶³ The Toraya house began selling dumplings in 1887 as a restaurant for pilgrims and visitors to the Taishakuten Temple, but since the success of the series, *kusadango* are said to have become synonymous with Shibamata and is a common souvenir for tourists visiting Shibamata.⁶⁴ The Nichiren Buddhist temple known as Shibamata Taishakuten is the

⁶² Schilling, "Into the Heartland with Tora-san," 250.

⁶³ The Toraya house was used predominantly for the first four films, then the rest were shot at the Takagiya house.

⁶⁴ "Toraya House" Shibamata Taishakuten Monzen Toraya. <http://www.toraya.info/>.

place where Tora-san was baptized and features prominently in the establishing shots of all the films, including *Wish You Were Here*. To declare this, Tora-san uses the phrase “*ubuyu wo tsukae*” to describe his baptizing, a phrase associated with the “Edokko” dialect. Many of Tora-san’s expressions and mannerisms are reminiscent of “Edokko” style of speech, making him feel somewhat out of place in the present, though this speech is a fabrication by both Yamada and Atsumi attempting to imitate the “Edokko.” The head priest of the Taishakuten Temple in the series was played by veteran actor Chishū Ryū (1904-1993), famous for his roles in numerous Yasujirō Ozu films. The first Madonna that Tora-san falls for is the head priest’s daughter, played by Sachiko Mitsumoto, and she makes further appearances in Shibamata later.⁶⁵ Ryū and Mitsumoto’s performances in the *Tora-san* series gave the temple a particular image in relation to the themes of the series and further developed it as a landmark and tourist destination of Shibamata. Shibamata’s landmarks are Tora-san’s landmarks, a connection developed through the repetition of Tora-san’s introduction and the cinematic emphasis is placed on his hometown. The affective space of the hometown itself was subject of political and cultural discourses during this time as the *Tora-san* series’ intersected with an event known as the *urusato* boom.

Reimagining the Hometown

Through Tora-san’s outward affection towards Shibamata, the series emphasizes a strong feeling of connection with one’s hometown. This feeling was commercialized and highly promoted at the time of the films using the term *urusato*. *Urusato* at this time signified a wide range of cultural productions that celebrated a supposed pre-modern village and natural

⁶⁵ Mitsumoto makes appearances in the seventh film, *Tora-san, The Good Samaritan*, and the forty-sixth film, *Tora-san’s Matchmaker*.

environment.⁶⁶ Although, within the urban space of Shibamata, Yamada appropriates the qualities associated with the *furusato* in favor of the fictional downtown family. *Furusato* at this time described an imaginary relationship to the physical location that is manifested and strengthened by a nostalgic sentiment spurred by media productions and political messaging. During the 1970s a “*furusato* boom” occurred, in which urban residents were incited to idealize a “return” to the rural, natural Japan. Japanese media productions became rife with references to the *furusato* in music, film, advertising, as well as municipal campaigns such as *Furusato Tokyo* and *Discover Japan*. Robertson observes how cultural productions and popular opinions engage with the process of *furusato-zukuri* (creating *furusato*), the underlying political consciousness behind these sentimental landscapes of nostalgia that focused on the “recreation of village-like ambience in cities and villages.”⁶⁷ *Furusato-zukuri* brings attention to an idealized pastoral vision of Japanese village life populated by symbols of rural nature such as mountains and fields, as well as promotion of traditional festivals and songs. Projects such as these arose as a result of a dichotomy, partially on the part of the producers, between generations living their lives in modern urban cities and the idealized roots in the villages and towns that constituted a “past” state. This came to head in the 1980s when a discussion on a supposed “new *furusato*” began. The addition of “new” is a key modifier as the many urban residents at this time were born and raised in the cities, without a personal connection to the village-like ambience promoted by *furusato-zukuri*. This feeling of estrangement is not new, as literary critic Kobayashi Hideo discusses in his 1933 essay “Literature that has Lost its Home” (*Kokyo wo Ushinatta Bungaku*). He writes: “Looking back over my past, I see there not so much a Tokyo man born in a city

⁶⁶ Jennifer Robertson, “Furusato Japan: The Culture and Politics of Nostalgia.” *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 1, no. 4 (1988): 494.

⁶⁷ Robertson, “Furusato Japan: the Culture and Politics of Nostalgia,” 498.

called Tokyo, as an abstraction of a city man, born in no particular place. Writing which considers this and that about the abstraction can without doubt be literature of a sort, but it has no substantial backing.”⁶⁸ However, after the proliferation of urban living as a result of the high economic growth, the nostalgic desire for a return to the rural landscape of Japan itself becomes an object of desire, summarized by Robertson as “nostalgia for nostalgia,”⁶⁹ captured in the viewing of the *Tora-san* films.

New *furusato* in this context becomes codified as a set of emotions that connects people to place, and conversely connects Tora-san to Shibamata. While generally there is still a commonly association of *furusato* with natural aesthetics of mountains and rivers, key characteristics of the new *furusato* consist of nostalgia, neighborhood comradery, compassion, local dialect, and motherly love, as identified by of a 1984 reader column of the Asahi Shinbun.⁷⁰ While Shibamata does have some pleasant scenery of the riverbank by the Edogawa river that features heavily in the visual nostalgia of *Wish You Were Here*, it is distinctly an urban landscape. Instead, what occurs in the *Tora-san* films is that Shibamata associates the established elements of the *furusato* with an urban space. The above characteristics can be found within the films’ depictions of Shibamata and its residents. The neighborhood of Taishakuten Sandō that housed the extended cast contained “small family enterprises [like the Kuramaya house] and a sense of close-knit neighborhood” that was associated with the *shitamichi*.⁷¹ As *shitamachi* neighborhoods like Shibamata can be seen as vanishing spaces, they began to appear “warmer

⁶⁸ Edward Seidensticker, “Kobayashi Hideo.” In *Tradition and Modernization in Japanese Culture*, ed. Donald H. Shively, Princeton University Press, 1971, 438.

⁶⁹ Robertson, “Furusato Japan: The Culture and Politics of Nostalgia,” 495.

⁷⁰ Robertson, “Furusato Japan: The Culture and Politics of Nostalgia,” 500-502.

⁷¹ Waley, “Moving the Margins of Tokyo,” 1538.

and more approachable than other sections of Tokyo.”⁷² Nostalgia with this type of neighborhood becomes that same object of desire described by Robertson, with the relaxed atmosphere contrasting with the busy life of Tokyo at this time. The extended cast are always welcomed in and out of the Kuramaya house, as Yamada recalls an anecdote about one of the Shibamata family-friends Tako-Shachō, played by Hisai Dasao (1923-1988), whose daughter Akemi returns in *Wish You Were Here*. Yamada recalls “Tako-Shachō would sit at the *agarikamachi* (entrance step) and not come up on the *tatami*. He wouldn’t come in unless someone says, ‘Shachō, do come in.’ In a way, he’s a quasi-family member.”⁷³ Characters like Tako-Shachō would always be treated compassionately despite not being blood related to the Kurama family. In addition Tora-san’s Edokko style speech, described earlier, is infused with the local dialect of his hometown, as he brings it with him on his travels and encounters an array of local dialects from around the country.

The term “motherly love” from the reader column may seem ironic within this series as Tora-san does not have a mother. However, despite the close association of “mother” with the *furusato*, social critic Matsuomoto Kenichi argues that, due to the rapid urbanization in the postwar as well as the predominance of nuclear families, both words have lost their external referents and are now “dead words (*shigo*).”⁷⁴ Without those referents, the emotions associated with “motherly love” are still able to be rendered on the screen through the affective depictions of family within the Kuramaya house without the physical presence of a mother. When he created this series, Yamada intended to “set the stage for a family with little blood relationships,”

⁷² Masako Nakagawa, “Tora-san, A Japanese Hero” *Education About Asia*. Association for Asian Studies, Vol 2, Number 2, Fall 1997: <https://www.asianstudies.org/publications/eaas/archives/tora-san-a-japanese-hero/56>.

⁷³ Yamada Yōji and Baishō Chieko “The Modern Day Family Without Tora-san” by Ikushima Jun, *Discuss Japan*, April 13, 2014.

⁷⁴ Robertson, “Furusato Japan: The Culture and Politics of Nostalgia,” 500.

which he furthers to insist that “blood is not the most important aspect of the family.”⁷⁵ This idea is expressed in the seventh film of the series when Tora-san, after meeting his birth mother for the second time, finally confesses to his aunt and uncle who raised that he sees them as his mother and father.⁷⁶ When Tora-san brings one of his Madonna home, she usually begins by speaking politely as she is an outsider, believing to be in an outsider position. Usually a member of the family would tell her not to do so as she is not an outsider, but also a “quasi-member” of the family. The Toraya house in the series becomes a space where social statuses and group organization are done away with, no matter their origin. A strong example of the dispersal of social status in favor of affective connection can be seen in the dinner scenes of the *Tora-san* films, celebrated in the one featured in *Wish You Were Here*.

At around the mid-point of the film, Mitsuo and Izumi are invited for dinner at his parents’ home in Shibamata, where they enjoy a family dinner. They sit around a *chabudai*, the low four-legged table that was often found in the living rooms of traditional style homes. Yamada believes that that the *chabudai* is “one of the greatest inventions of the Japanese common people.”⁷⁷ This is because the shared space of the singular table created close familial bonding unlike the traditional *ozen*, the four-legged tray that would be offered to the father of the family first. Yamada asserts that “an *ozen* (the four-legged tray) would create ranks, but when everyone sits at a round table, you don’t have ranks. It changed the relations in the family.”⁷⁸ On the square table of the *chabudai*, family and non-family members would sit at an equal level

⁷⁵ Yamada Yōji and Baishō Chieko “The Modern Day Family Without Tora-san” by Ikushima Jun, *Discuss Japan*, April 13, 2014.

⁷⁶ *Otoko wa tsurai yo, funtō hen* [Tora-san, the Good Samaritan]. Directed by Yōji Yamada (Shōchiku, 1971).

⁷⁷ Yamada Yōji and Baishō Chieko “The Modern Day Family Without Tora-san” by Ikushima Jun, *Discuss Japan*, April 13, 2014.

⁷⁸ Yamada Yōji and Baishō Chieko “The Modern Day Family Without Tora-san” by Ikushima Jun, *Discuss Japan*, April 13, 2014.

from each other and share the table space together. In this scene Mitsuo narrates: “I never saw it coming. Izumi Oikawa suddenly appeared and is eating my mom’s cooking at my family home.” At this moment Mitsuo reminisces about the various times the Kurama family sat together around the *chabudai*, as shots from the previous films cut in and out of the screen. The nostalgic background music combines with the sounds of laughter and merrymaking to provide an aural nostalgia that fills the space of the family room. After dinner Sakura invites Izumi to stay the evening with them, to which Izumi is overcome with joy and exclaims “Lovely! I haven’t slept on Tatami floors in over 20 years.”⁷⁹ Izumi expresses nostalgia for a particular Japanese cultural marker, that of Tatami floors frequently found in many Japanese homes. As Izumi climbs up the stairs and waves goodnight to Mitsuo, captured by a point-of-view shot of Mitsuo looking up at her, the main tune is played by a somber piano and the shot cuts to a memory in which a young Mitsuo is looking up at a young Izumi from the same angle. At that time, Izumi was staying the night as well, from the kindness of Sakura. The *Tora-san* series shows that even without the presence of a mother, the motherly love associated with the *furusato* is still strongly expressed through the warm feelings birthed by the closeness of the family spaces, a feeling that transcends bloodlines. In *Wish You Were Here*, those warm feelings and compassion are celebrated, and shown to be transferred to people even outside one’s blood relation. Yamada’s emphasis on hometown identification, close-knit neighborhoods, and family gathering came at a time when those characteristics were being promoted in an affective image of searching for vanishing spaces.

⁷⁹ *Tora-san, Wish You Were Here*, 01:04:19 to 01:05:47.

Loss and Longing after Tora-san

Shōchiku released two *Tora-san* films each year until 1989, yet due to increasing health concerns with Atsumi, production had to be changed.⁸⁰ Starting with the forty-second film, *Tora-san, My Uncle*,⁸¹ scenes with Atsumi were reduced and scenes involving Mitsuo (now in his twenties) were increased, and Mitsuo became a more prominent character in the films. Coincidentally, this production change occurred just after the end of the Shōwa era. Atsumi persevered however, and continued to act as one *Tora-san* film was released each year until his death in 1996. Though, by that time the *Tora-san* series was already starting to seem slightly outdated. The passage of twenty years suddenly started to be felt both on and off the screen. Atsumi, Baishō, and other members of the cast and crew who seemed to stay the same age throughout a majority of the series were now physically aging. Mitsuo started in the series as a newborn and by now has finished school and has a job working at an office. In addition, as the Heisei era began and the asset price bubble burst, drastic shifts in the external social and cultural landscapes impacted the Japan that Yamada was trying to depict. However, despite this, popularity of the series remained unchanged, still receiving similar ticket sales throughout the last few films.⁸² Despite the change to only one release per year and the economy in recession, *Tora-san* seemed to maintain its hold on Japanese cinematic culture.

In a review of the forty-eighth film released in 1995, film scholar Aaron Gerow discusses how cinematic markers of Christmas often came in two forms: Godzilla and Tora-

⁸⁰ There were increasing reports of Atsumi being unwell during shooting, and in 1991 he was diagnosed with liver cancer.

⁸¹ *Otoko wa tsurai yo: boku no ojisan* [Tora-san, My Uncle]. Directed by Yōji Yamada (Shōchiku, 1989).

⁸² Instead, I believe that as the *Tora-san* series ages and eventually ends, it began to transform from depicting a culture that is vanishing into itself a symbol of vanishing culture.

san.⁸³ However, with the ending of Godzilla that year, Gerow proclaimed “Godzilla is dead, but Tora-san will live on forever as a Japanese institution.”⁸⁴ The iconic radioactive creature Godzilla that dominated the screens along with Tora-san faced his demise that year at the end of *Godzilla vs Destroyah*.⁸⁵ The dwindling ticket sales of the latest films was cited as a factor in the decision to end the series, though ultimately “the simple truth that the Heisei series had reached a dead end creatively.”⁸⁶ Tōhō Studios greatly benefitted from the end of the series; the production company even held a funeral for the fictional monster broadcasted on television, and a Hollywood film was on the horizon. However contrary to Gerow’s hopes, only one year after his statement Tora-san would die as well. Atsumi passed away on August 4, 1996. He was so synonymous with his role as Tora-san, that his death was reported as equal to the death of Tora-san as well, and news of his death was met with public outcry. Just four days after his death on August 8, Atsumi was posthumously awarded the Peoples Honor Award by the Japanese government. Cabinet Secretary Seiroku Kajiyama describes Atsumi as providing “happiness and enjoyment to citizens of this country through his acting.”⁸⁷ That year was the first year since its inception in 1969 that a *Tora-san* film was not released.

Without Atsumi, the series officially ended with forty-eight entries, however support for Tora-san did not cease. Fans packed screenings of Tora-san films and over 270,000 sets of videos put out by Shōchiku were sold. To help fill the void left by the icon, Yamada and

⁸³ *Otoko wa tsurai yo Torajirō kurenai no hana* [Tora-san to the Rescue]. Directed by Yōji Yamada (Shōchiku, 1995).

⁸⁴ Aaron Gerow, review of *Otoko wa tsurai yo: Torajirō kurenai no hana*, film by Yōji Yamada. *Yomiuri Shimbun*, December 28, 1995: 10. <https://kinemaclub.org/reviews/otoko-wa-tsurai-yo>.

⁸⁵ *Gojira tai desutoroia* [Godzills vs. Destroyah]. Directed by Takao Okawara (Toho Pictures) 1995.

⁸⁶ William Tsutsui, *Godzilla on My Mind : Fifty Years of the King of Monsters* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 73.

⁸⁷ Quoted in Schilling, “Into the Heartland with Tora-san,” 254.

Shōchiku released *The Man Who Caught the Rainbow*⁸⁸ on New Year of 1997. The film was a tribute to both Atsumi and the *Tora-san* series, as the main character shared some of his characteristics and featured cameos from many characters from the series, including Tora-san himself played by a double. The tributes continued as, in August 1997, one last film was released to respond to the deep-rooted popularity of Tora-san. The forty-ninth film *Tora-san's Tropical Fever Special Edition* was released as a special edition of the twenty-fifth film with new music and new footage of the present Mitsuo searching for his uncle.⁸⁹ Without Atsumi though, the *Tora-san* series could not continue and the cultural institution that seemed like it could go on forever began to fade, as the social and economic conditions that Yamada responded to transformed as well.

After the collapse of the bubble economy boom instigating the “lost decade” of the 1990s and 2000s, the discursive construction of the salaryman identity in its previous form had become threatened. The corporate bankruptcies, rising unemployment, and organizational restructuring greatly affected young workers as well as middle-aged corporate employees. The middle-class, middle-management men that were once held up as the ideal citizen, became perceived as inefficient in the rationalist environment of post-bubble era global economics. Dasgupta summarizes the strain on the archetypical masculinity of the Shōwa era salaryman: “Not only did these men have to contend with the financial strain of being laid-off, but also given the centrality of the *daikokubashira* (central pillar of the household) husband/father identity in their lives, their very masculinity, within society, and more specifically, within the family, was compromised. Hence, for many, there was a sense of betrayal by the very corporations to whom

⁸⁸ *Niji wo tsukamu otoko* [The Man Who Caught the Rainbow]. Directed by Yōji Yamada (Shōchiku, 1997).

⁸⁹ The title is taken from the twenty-fifth film in the series uses extensive footage from that film, despite the child Mitsuo being played by Hayato Nakamura at the time.

they had devoted their whole careers, and a deepening sense of anxiety about their place in society.”⁹⁰ The image of masculinity that Yamada and Atsumi were trying to contrast in *Tora-san* had been lost as well, altering the image of the affluent, compassionate Japan found in the films.

Though the salaryman discourse that the postwar generation championed has transformed in the wake of the collapse of the economy, its hold in Japanese popular culture still continues. However, now expressing forms of anxiety in the devastating economic realities and finding its way into *Wish You Were Here*. Over the years following the collapse, a newer form of idealized corporate masculinity began to be championed, referencing a Euro-American styled neoliberal and globalized hypermasculinity. This transformation is marked by qualities of egocentrism, conditional loyalty, and declining sense of responsibility for others. To some, this newer idealization of masculinity appeared to hold higher expressions of individuality and flexibility, seemingly less rigid and patriarchal than that of salarymen prior.⁹¹ This salaryman masculinity was another dominant image of masculinity, caused by the weakening of socio-economic stability and financial security in post-bubble Japan. Cinematic representations of salaryman are continued in films such as *Tokyo Sonata*.⁹² This film tells the story of an older salaryman father who, while striving to represent the *daikokushibara* masculinity of the Shōwa era, has lost his job due to the economic realities of the post-bubble era recession. The father stumbles trying to adjust to his new economic and social situation, unable to connect the new post-bubble salarymen and unable to assert his position in the way he is used to. *Tokyo Sonata* shows the fragmentation of the father-centered family performance of the salaryman in favor of the more

⁹⁰ Dasgupta, “Snapshots of Shōwa (CE 1926-89) and PostShōwa Japan Through Salaryman Articulations,” 42.

⁹¹ Dasgupta, “Snapshots of Shōwa (CE 1926-89) and PostShōwa Japan Through Salaryman Articulations,” 43.

⁹² *Tōkyō sonata* [Tokyo Sonata]. Directed by Kiyoshi Kurosawa (Nikkatsu, 2008).

individualized socio-economic atmosphere that he has found himself in. In addition, there also occurred a “Shōwa 30s” boom, a series of films that nostalgically reconstruct the wartime and postwar in ways that re-affirm the present in films such as *ALWAYS Sunset on third Street*.⁹³ *ALWAYS* uses its scenes to “remember” the close living of the *shitamachi* after the war and celebrate communal bonds in a close-knit neighborhood similar to Shibamata in the recovery of Tokyo. Films such as this create a visual nostalgia for a collective memory of the past that is looked back on fondly in present day Tokyo, rendered cinematically in a manner similar to the *Tora-san* series in decades prior, although not being wholly representative of everyone during those times. However, neither *ALWAYS* nor *Wish You Were Here* suggests a desire to go back, or that those times they represent were better in a way. Instead, they use their narratives, themes, and images that connect back to past times in order to alleviate the anxieties of and support present day audiences, which *Wish You Were Here*, in its celebration of the icon Tora-san and its new narrative involving the protagonist Mitsuo, masterfully executes.

⁹³ *ALWAYS sanchōme no yūhi* [ALWAYS Sunset on third Street]. Directed by Yamazaki Takashi (Tōhō, 2005).

CHAPTER V:

REVIVING THE TORA-SAN FORMULA

Being such a milestone of a film, arriving fifty years since the first film, *Wish You Were Here* frequently harkens back to previous Tora-san films both literally, with its use of images from those films, as well as structurally, with its use of story elements and tropes, to incite a feeling of nostalgia through its narrative connections. While still set in the world of *Tora-san*, with its characters and the location of Shibamata, the twenty-two year time gap and, more importantly, the absence of Tora-san himself is realized within the story itself. As such, along with being a celebration of the cinematic world and of the iconic Tora-san, *Wish You Were Here* also tells its own story, featuring a new protagonist and with a different approach to the central theme of family. In *Wish You Were Here*, Tora-san becomes recast as a guiding figure for Mitsuo, his nephew, as the new protagonist goes on his own “Tora-san-like” adventure. This chapter attempts to diagnose the self-referentiality of the film as it intersects with the previous films of its own series. Through a close look at the film’s narrative arc, tropes, themes, and characters, *Wish You Were Here* offers more than just a referential highlight of its own series but also offers something new and grounded in its time of creation, looking fondly back on its cinematic image while allowing it to age as well.

Reading the film against its own series serves two critical purposes: one, it establishes the continuity inherent in *Wish You Were Here* both in its references and its narrative structure, and two, in order to localize genre conventions within the film itself. Yamada’s utilization of melodramatic and *ninjo kigeki* (human relationship drama) story writing within the film is at its most effective within its own context, therefore that context is what will be highlighted when discussing the formula of *Tora-san*. The *Tora-san* film series executes a high degree of

sentimentality by punctuating its comedic scenes with an acute sense of pathos, or at times even tragedy. In each of the *Tora-san* films, including *Wish You Were Here*, Yamada seesaws between feelings of joy and sadness in order to build a strong sentimental connection to Tora-san and his family. On the topic of comedy and tragedy, Yamada wrote in a press release titled “The Meaning of Comedy” that “talking about something sad while you are laughing-now, that’s hard to do! But in this unaccommodating world of ours, there are some truths that can only be told in the form of jokes.”⁹⁴ This approach is commercialized today as Yamada’s ability to “wrap laughter and tears,”⁹⁵ in the exaggerated comedy and sadness of *Wish You Were Here*, predicated their effect on the familiarity one has to the series. The film’s narrative nostalgia builds on this storytelling approach by Yamada, as he refers back to his own work on the series structurally, in addition to directly, in this final film of his series.

Celebrating the *Tora-san* Formula

After showing the Shōchiku Studio credit, the film displays a dedication to Atsumi, “with love and respect.”⁹⁶ For *Wish You Were Here*, one does not need to have an extensive knowledge of the *Tora-san* series. Yamada edits scenes directly from the previous films; thus, knowing that Mitsuo confesses to Izumi in the forty-eighth film or that Izumi’s mother had previously confided in Tora-san in the forty-third is unnecessary as those moments are placed within the film itself. This eliminates the necessity of having to remember the events of particular films, or knowing about those films at all, as *Wish You Were Here* provides all the detail about the

⁹⁴ Matoush, “Nostalgia, The Search for Japanese Identity, and Tora-san as Cultural Icon,” 249.

⁹⁵ This phrase appears in nearly every promotional segment about *Wish You Were Here* and refers to the popularity of the series in Japan.

⁹⁶ “Kono Sakuhin wo Keiai Suru Atsumi Kiyoshi san ni Sasageru”, *Tora-san, Wish You Were Here*, 00:00:25.

characters and their pasts as necessary to the plot into the film. This may come in the form of Mitsuo introducing his mother and father in an early scene of the film in narration followed by a flashback to their encounter fifty years ago, but frequently the characters also directly express their reminiscence of Tora-san. A strong instance of this is when Sakura picks up the melon, she states “When I see melons, I can’t help remembering my brother.”⁹⁷ Then, Yamada inserts the particular scene involving Tora-san, his family, and the melon that she is remembering.⁹⁸ Context is not implied in *Wish You Were Here*, but is instead integrated into the film. These instances serve both to instill a nostalgic reminiscence for those films and also to celebrate the fictional world of *Tora-san* as it arrives at a milestone. The main way that the film celebrates the previous films is by re-incorporating the familiar narrative formula in the formation of Mitsuo’s own “Tora-san-like” adventure.

Mitsuo’s story in *Wish You Were Here* follows that of Tora-san in the previous films, as he grows to assume a narrative role similar to his uncle’s. While each installment depicts a different adventure for Tora-san, the plots typically follow three overarching acts that blend into each other. First, before even the plot begins, one popular trope that Yamada employs in the *Tora-san* series is that of the dream sequence, foreshadowing events and moods in a particular film before they occur. In this film, Mitsuo dreams about his last encounter with Izumi twenty-four years ago. Within the dream, Mitsuo is running to Izumi at a beach to express how he really feels about her, stumbling and rolling as the image of waves rising and falling are overlaid on top of them. After the typical dream sequence, the films show Tora-san returning home and having a heartfelt reunion with his family in Shibamata, updating the viewers on their current

⁹⁷ *Tora-san, Wish You Were Here*, 01:28:38 to 1:29:19.

⁹⁸ This is a well-regarded scene from the franchise known as the “Melon Fight,” (*Merou Soudou*) taken from the fifteenth film, *Tora-san’s Rise and Fall* (1975).

condition. Mitsuo, too, returns home to Shibamata for the memorial of his wife's death anniversary, reintroducing the audience to the cast, now visibly aged.

The second act of the films introduces the Madonna as well as the conflict Tora-san finds himself in to come to her aid. Izumi is Mitsuo's Madonna, foreshadowed by his earlier dream, as they reunite by a chance encounter at his book signing. The film's central conflict involves family once again, focusing on the ways that families may appear together or apart. This comes into effect in the subsequent scene when the two catch up with each other's lives, a scene where they also confront Lily on why she and Tora-san never got married. Mitsuo and Izumi have dinner at his family home in the scene described earlier, after which Izumi states that she has to visit her ailing father. Mitsuo asks her if she still hasn't forgiven him, revealing that her parents have had a bad relationship. The details of Izumi's strained relationship with her family are not the primary concern, and Mitsuo himself does not know the full picture either. However, he still feels the urge to help her, just as his uncle would.⁹⁹ Mitsuo feels guilty because he does not tell Izumi about his wife's death, not wanting the pity from a woman whom he believes has an ideal family back in Europe. Izumi, in turn, believes too that Mitsuo has a happy family life after she has dinner and stays the night with his parents in Shibamata.

In the third and final act, through laughter and tears, the conflict is resolved and Tora-san (or, here, Mitsuo in the role of Tora-san) and the Madonna have to part ways. Izumi reunites with her father but cannot stay with him because of her life in Europe. Mitsuo returns home and has a drink with his father in the scene described earlier, looking to his uncle for guidance and support. The next day, Mitsuo meets Izumi at the airport to see her off and spend one last moment together. After a whole journey of anticipation, both finally express to each other how much they

⁹⁹ The conflict in Izumi's family is central to the forty-third film, *Tora-san Takes a Vacation* (1990), which later on a key scene from is inserted. Izumi's mother Reiko (played by Mari Natsuki) is Tora-san's Madonna in the film.

have missed each other and Mitsuo finally musters the courage to confess to her about his wife. Izumi forgives Mitsuo, saying that it's just like him and they share a kiss before she leaves for her flight. The film concludes back in Mitsuo's apartment, with Yuri telling her father "Welcome home" (*Okaeri*), as she remarks "the past three days, it feels like your mind has been somewhere far away." *Wish You Were Here*'s plot structure adopts the formula from the previous *Tora-san* films, celebrating Tora-san's journey as Mitsuo's journey in the film.

The film plays on a number of other familiar conventions of and references to the *Tora-san* series in its celebration of the franchise. The opening montage of the film uses the *Tora-san* theme song used at the start of every film, originally performed by Atsumi, but now performed by Keisuke Kuwata, one of Japan's most famous singers of the band *Southern Allstars* and a longtime fan of the series. Kuwata had previously performed the song "It's Tough Being a Man" on television, and also included "Tora-san" in the title of his own music variety show, which had caught Yamada's interest to work together on the new film.¹⁰⁰ When Mitsuo first meets with his publishing editor early in the film, she brings him research on his next projects on street peddlers (*rotenshou*, another word for *tekiya*) establishing a link between Mitsuo's profession and that of his uncle.¹⁰¹ Following, the family dinner around the square table is a frequent highlight of the *Tora-san* films as, during this scene in the film, Mitsuo fondly reminisces over them in his narration and in the previous films' scenes placed within. Additionally, as each film in the series is known for highlighting the particular location of Japan as part of Tora-san's journey, Mitsuo in the role of Tora-san continues this tradition too. Mitsuo and Izumi journey to a location that hasn't been visited by Tora-san, to the Miura Peninsula near the Sagami Bay.

¹⁰⁰ Eiga Natalie Henshuubu, "'Otoko wa tsurai yo' Shinsaku no Shudaika wo Kuwata Keisuke ga Tantō, Ōpuninguni ni Shutsuen Kettei" *Eiga Natalie*, February 21, 2019, <https://natalie.mu/eiga/news/320768>.

¹⁰¹ *Tora-san Wish You Were Here*, 00:07:32 to 00:07:55.

Lastly, Yamada's signature seesawing is apparent in the film too, felt strongest during Izumi's visit to her father. Her father offers her some of his savings for his grandchildren from the purse tied around his neck. As she leaves, Mitsuo is awkwardly left with Izumi's father alone. The father asks Mitsuo to take care of his daughter in a heartwarming plea and, catching Mitsuo as he is leaving, shamelessly asks him for some money, seemingly returning to his scheming ways.¹⁰² The scene of the dying old man asking for the money from someone he just met is mildly humorous, but then the mood completely reverts when the father raises his finger and asks for a second bill, declaring "think of it as an advance funeral offering."¹⁰³ The father's face is not visible in the shot, just his blurred finger as the camera focuses on Mitsuo's shocked expression. As a somber violin track plays, Mitsuo's eyes open wide and he complies silently. Fans of the series are well accustomed to how Yamada transitions the emotion of a scene between comedy and tragedy, which is possible even without Tora-san.

The most impactful celebration of the series comes right at the end of the film. After Yuri welcomes him home, Mitsuo finally sits down and begins his next book. The title of this book is appropriately named *Okaeri Tora-san*. Mitsuo narrates his first few words as he writes: "I had this dream. My uncle was standing by the entrance. When I said 'welcome back', the pretty lady next to him bowed her head. I asked 'Who is this?', and my uncle answered bashfully 'That's my wife.'"¹⁰⁴ Mitsuo's new story embodies the nostalgia for his uncle and places it in his future text. The inclusion of such a scene celebrates the character and his heartfelt presence in the fictional world. One final montage of Tora-san and his Madonna is played, and the credits roll over an iconic scene of Tora-san performing *tankabai*.

¹⁰² The father had previously cheated on his wife and gambled their money away.

¹⁰³ *Tora-san Wish You Were Here*, 01:23:12 to 01:25:56.

¹⁰⁴ *Tora-san Wish You Were Here*, 01:47:45 to 01:48:18.

Bringing the world of *Tora-san* into the Reiwa Era

Yamada does not just celebrate the cinematic world of *Tora-san*, he continues to develop it. The characters and storylines in the world of *Tora-san* were reflective of their time period and now are placed within the present society. The twenty-four year time gap that is felt by the audience is acknowledged within the film as well, signaling progression along with celebration. Minor physical markers such as Mitsuo typing on a laptop and Sakura's use of a smartphone indicate how the characters have adapted to the present day. Izumi herself is physical marker of the time gap as she has been away in Europe for the past twenty-two years, now returning back into the lives and world of *Tora-san*. This is, in fact, a reflection of her actress Kumiko Gotō, who quit acting after her last *Tora-san* film and moved to Europe, never appearing on the big screen again until *Wish You Were Here*. In the film, Izumi is now globally connected as a reflection of the evermore globalizing world of the twenty-first century. She works as an officer of the United Nations high Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), speaking French as well as Japanese and first appears in the film at a conference presenting on refugee issues in the world. Learning of Izumi's experiences, Mitsuo puts himself down as a simple writer compared to her international profession. In updating the main characters to the present day, *Wish You Were Here* tells its own story while still utilizing the *Tora-san* formula.

This new story is closely tied to Mitsuo's character arc in the film and enables him to undergo an emotional journey within his physical one. While he still follows the same three part journey as his uncle with a Madonna, his interactions with the theme of family is accented with one of parenthood as well, diverging from those encountered by his uncle. Firstly, *Tora-san* is a wandering peddler who didn't know his parents, whereas Mitsuo grew up with both his parents,

but is now a single father who leaves his company in pursuit of a writing career. He lives with his daughter in a small central Tokyo apartment, away from his family home instead of travelling alone. While both Mitsuo and his uncle occupy somewhat marginal positions in society, not adhering to the expected roles of men of their age, Mitsuo undergoes an emotional transformation in the film's narrative when coming up against the central conflicts, whereas Tora-san is mainly faced with the issue of settling down. At the start of the film, Mitsuo is a passive character, trapped within the loss of his uncle and his wife. In scenes involving him, Mitsuo is frequently quiet, hanging his head down, blinded by his over consideration for others as he simply listens and rarely expresses himself, only occasionally reacting, like in the scene with Akemi, played by Jun Miho, the daughter of Tako-Shachō. When Mitsuo is home after the memorial ceremony, the topic of his remarriage comes up. Despite it being seven years since his wife's passing, Mitsuo still cannot bring himself to consider another woman, pushing back against the initial questions from family members. The family members' insistence carries an implication that there is something seemingly incomplete about Mitsuo's family without a wife or mother. This prompts Akemi to remark "We know you are a good father, but every girl needs a mother."¹⁰⁵ In response, Mitsuo loses his temper at her and she stomps out of the house, but the thought still bothers him. Later, when Yuri herself comes to her father to talk about the topic, he is stunned that his own daughter would support his remarriage as he was too concerned about bringing a new woman into her life. With the prospect of remarriage now considered thanks to Yuri, Izumi suddenly reenters into Mitsuo's life. Mitsuo and Izumi both possess misconceptions about each other's families, believing that the other lives in an ideal happy family environment. Izumi believes that Mitsuo's wife is still alive, while Mitsuo is considerate of Izumi's international life and is thrown into her family drama involving her parents. When their past love

¹⁰⁵ *Tora-san Wish You Were Here*, 00:20:39 to 00:20:55.

is rekindled by their journey together, one may assume that Mitsuo and Izumi would get together, as if in a romance film. However, Yamada does not suggest that the two would be able to fulfill the hole in each other's lives. Mitsuo recognizes that Izumi lives a separate life from him in another country, with a job, husband, and children, as she does as well. Here, conventions of romantic films are subverted in favor of *Tora-san's* tradition of never staying with the Madonna. Though, that doesn't leave Mitsuo alone, as the film suggests that he might end up with his editor Takano-san, played by Chizuru Ikewaki. The chance meeting with Izumi, as well as the memories of his uncle that bring him back to the past, to those warm family memories, allows him to relive the joys of falling in love, the undivided support from his uncle, as well as the difficulty of expressing that love. Mitsuo's journey is internal. Although he does not leave at the end of the film like his uncle does, Mitsuo embarks on a new venture in life with a newfound internal confidence that he did not have at the start. The celebration of the *Tora-san* series and the new storyline involving Mitsuo and Izumi is made possible by the nostalgic effect generated by the film's intersection with previous installments, an effect that is conveyed through Yamada's cinematic language.

CHAPTER VI:

THE CINEMATIC NOSTALGIA FOR TORA-SAN

The creation of this film can be considered a nostalgic act in itself. It is an engagement with the past, granting insight into the relationship between past and present. Yamada's filmmaking in *Wish You Were Here* adds affect to the relationship between past and present by placing cultural cinematic nostalgia into Tora-san himself. Though, while the cinematic image that Yamada depicts takes a different form now, one thing has not changed. Yamada's filmmaking choices are influenced by political and cultural contexts in his crafting of cinema and memory. The film is set in the present day, showing the characters and locations as they would be in the current times. The time difference felt by Mitsuo and Izumi is the exact same as for the audience in 2019, evoking a shared nostalgia beyond the screen. The film is also forward-looking, about seeking answers in the past to embark on new beginnings for Mitsuo, guided by the lingering presence of his uncle. On a technical level, the film's ability "revive" Tora-san, an icon of the idealized image in the series, is made possible by present technologies of digital restoration. However, this revival goes beyond simply the inclusion of the man himself to incite a quick nostalgic emotion from the audience. The ability of a filmic text to construct nostalgia, especially for a particular period in modern history, cannot be understated. As scholars such as Paul Grainge argue, nostalgia is able to be manipulated and fractured into both a mood and an aesthetic mode.¹⁰⁶

Prior to analyzing the cinematic techniques of the film, the break-down of nostalgia into the nostalgic experience and the nostalgic object must be considered as well as the relationship between the two in this context shaped by the history of the *Tora-san* series. The nostalgic

¹⁰⁶ Paul Grainge, *Monochrome Memories : Nostalgia and Style in Retro America*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2002.

experience describes the longing for an ideal that cannot come back, whereas the nostalgic object is what one is nostalgic for. Tora-san is special in that he is able to encapsulate both a nostalgic experience and a nostalgic object. The spectatorial experience of attending the movies year after year, in addition to the affective experience of laughing and crying at and with Tora-san, are evoked in the nostalgic experience. When *Wish You Were Here* was released in 2019, it had a late December release as well to recreate the filmgoing experience that Yamada and Shōchiku Studio had set nearly fifty years ago. The longing for the “good old days” in the image of Japan that the *Tora-san* series depicted is evoked by those nostalgic feelings of longing for the man Tora-san. As such, Tora-san himself needs to be also considered as a nostalgic object. He is physically present as the icon of the previous films, as well as a vehicle for the consumption of the nostalgic experience. Tora-san is a fictional character, originally written by Yamada with contribution from Atsumi, but diffused a particular cinematic image during the high-growth and bubble economy eras. Tora-san’s nostalgia is in play within the language of the cinema that brought him to life.

The filmic nostalgia for Tora-san and the feelings associated with his image of Japan is activated by the cinematic techniques employed by Yamada and his crew. The following analysis uses the filmic text of *Wish You Were Here* to how this nostalgia is being rendered within the medium of cinema. This analysis is guided by the work by film scholar Christine Spengler to put theories of the “nostalgia film” into practice by reflecting “the ways in which nostalgia enter into a relationship with the cinema beyond the visual creation of pastness.”¹⁰⁷ The visual pastness created in *Wish You Were Here* is captured within the nostalgia for Tora-san. These components work together to reveal the cinematic rendering of nostalgia in *Wish You Were Here*, both within

¹⁰⁷ Christine Spengler, *Screening Nostalgia: Populuxe Props and Technicolor Aesthetics in Contemporary American Film* (Berghahn on Film. New York: Berghahn Books, 2009), 68.

and out of the film itself. Sprengler breaks down her analysis of nostalgia in a film text into four distinct categories: narrative, music, opening montage, and period casting. Following from literary analyses, narrative structure and music seem to apply appropriately to strategies of film analysis. However, the inclusion of opening montage and period casting are new additions by Sprengler in order to place emphasis on to the cinematic component of the text. However, in applying Sprengler's framework to *Wish You Were Here* a fifth category will be added, that of the images of Tora-san himself edited into the film. Unlike other nostalgia films, the visual incarnation of Tora-san are the literal scenes from previous films edited into *Wish You Were Here*. This self-referential editing is unique to *Wish You Were Here*, and is also its defining feature that allows Atsumi to endure his role as Tora-san beyond his passing.

Narrative

Wish You Were Here's narrative itself is a narrative of nostalgia. The narrative of nostalgia seen in classic Hollywood film is presented in the structure of equilibrium-disequilibrium-equilibrium, echoing the ancient fictional narrative of Eden-loss-retrieval. The loss brings with it acts of mourning, longing and restoration of the Edenic condition.¹⁰⁸ The story is introduced in a state of equilibrium. That equilibrium is then threatened and disturbed, driving the characters to restore order to their lives. Although, the restored state is not exactly the original one from the start of the narrative, but it is one where stability is ensured. The narrative in *Wish You Were Here*, developed through its protagonist Mitsuo, follows this structure. At the start, Mitsuo is living his stable life with Yuri, keeping close ties with his hometown of Shibamata. He has his encounter with Izumi, in which the resurfacing of his feelings for her as

¹⁰⁸ Sprengler, *Screening Nostalgia*, 73.

well as his avoidance to tell Izumi the truth about his wife causes disruption internally. In the end, after he tells her about his wife and they finally share one last romantic moment, his life is brought back to stability and he is able to start writing his next novel. Thus, the most common structure of a narrative nostalgia seen in classic Hollywood is replicated in *Wish You Were Here*. However, the film is not only structured by nostalgia, but rather the narrative itself is ostensibly about nostalgia for Tora-san. Narratives about nostalgia are typically about visiting the past, mnemonic sites of childhood or other emotive spaces of the past, and realizing that past cannot be regained. In defining the function of these sites, Sprengler draws on Anthony Purdy's concept of the "mnemotope."

Purdy defines the mnemotope as "a chronotopic motif that manifests the presence of the past, the conscious or unconscious memory traces of a more or less distinct period of the life of a culture or an individual."¹⁰⁹ These objects can be accessed both physically, by travelling to the sites, or mentally, by flashback, and by doing so these objects become ones of nostalgic longing that bring a discernable presence of the past, or "memory traces." Purdy's inclusion of culture and individual draws a strong parallel to *Wish You Were Here*, due to the cultural nostalgia felt for Tora-san. Tora-san, a figure of the past, can be considered both a cultural mnemotope and also one shared by the individual Mitsuo. Tora-san manifests a compassionate presence rooted distinctly in a specific period encapsulated by the series, shared by the cultural consumption of the films. Additionally, all the main characters including Mitsuo are all individually troubled by their longing for Tora-san throughout the film. However, Yamada complicates the ways mnemotopes are accessed in *Wish You Were Here*. While Mitsuo does physically visit his childhood home multiple times in the film, these are not done out of nostalgic longing but rather

¹⁰⁹ Anthony Purdy, "Unearthing the Past: The Archaeology of Bog Bodies in Glob, Atwood, Hébert and Drabble," *Textual Practice*, 16:3 (2002): 447.

simply part of his regular lifestyle. Furthermore, the flashbacks experienced by Mitsuo and the other characters are not isolated memories to them. Rather, the memories are shared by everyone, including the audience. Finally, the figure of Tora-san himself does actually manifest in the film on a handful of occasions, blurring the separation between memory and reality and offering a physical image of the memory trace.

The nostalgic longing from memories fuels the protagonist's journey, however discovering these sites or objects usually does not yield the transformative effect that is anticipated. Instead, it is the journey itself that holds all the importance, stirring in the protagonist a self-discovery and "the knowledge that, while the past cannot be revisited, the memory of it as imprinted upon mnemotopic sites can function as a utopian model for the future."¹¹⁰ The visitation of the mnemotopic sites can enable change in the character's narrative, and allow them to face what comes next. This transformation for Mitsuo becomes complete when returning back from visiting Izumi's father. Her mother Reiko has her own memory of a moment with Tora-san where she confided in Tora-san after her husband cheated on her. In the scene presented in *Wish You Were Here*, Tora-san listens to her with a serious but empathetic look on his face. When Reiko retreats, saying "I'm sorry. We're still strangers. You wouldn't understand how I feel," the familiar music begins. Tora-san calmly nods and responds "I do. I don't understand much about marriage, but I understand desperately wanting to tell someone how you feel all too well," flashing a wide smile in the dark room. Reiko thanks him, wiping her nose and putting her hand on his.¹¹¹ At the close-up of their hands the music cuts and the scene returns back to the present with Reiko sitting in the backseat of Mitsuo's car. She has been

¹¹⁰ Sprengler, *Screening Nostalgia*, 74.

¹¹¹ *Otoko wa tsurai yo Torajirō no kyūujitsu* [Tora-san Takes a Vacation]. Directed by Yōji Yamada, Shōchiku, 1990.

drinking, running her mouth about her ex-husband's eventual death. Izumi is visibly bothered, trying not to look her mother in the eyes. Mitsuo interjects, offering some words of reassurance to which Reiko responds drunkenly with "I wish Izumi would have married you" continuing to embarrass her daughter. Finally, Reiko says "Is your wife nice? You shouldn't cheat on her" before opening another can of beer. Mitsuo's eyes open wide, unable to keep his white lie going but it is Izumi who finally bursts out at her mother. On the verge of tears, she blurts out "you're embarrassing me so shut up!" Reiko then forces Mitsuo to stop the car by opening the door while still in motion and clumsily gets out, trying to hitchhike back. Izumi gets out and calls to her mother but she is ignored, to which she gives up and says to Mitsuo "Let's go. Forget about her." At this point Mitsuo has gone beyond longing for Tora-san and has undergone his own transformation into someone who interjects into other people's lives to help them, who is not afraid to say how he feels, and is compassionate, just like his uncle. He knows that if Izumi doesn't make up with her mother now, she may never get the chance to. He tries to stop her from getting back into the car, to which she resists but then Mitsuo asserts to her that she is the only one who can calm her mother down. He finally convinces her by shouting "If my uncle was here, that's what he would say."¹¹² Izumi stops crying and Mitsuo pushes her to face her mother. A somber version of the theme song plays as the mother and daughter apologize to each other, crying and holding each other.

Music

In film, music and nostalgia are intertwined just as narrative and nostalgia are, however, once again, the ways in which *Wish You Were Here* draws from previous *Tora-san* films

¹¹² *Tora-san Wish You Were Here*, 01:34:58 to 01:38:51.

complicates what has been previously studied. Music in *Wish You Were Here* is sparse, trying not to infringe on the spoken dialog in the film. The main backing tracks play only at key points in the story, and at moments associated with the memories of Tora-san. Repetition is the key technique used by Yamada in this film as certain tracks and leitmotifs are repeated several times in the film. Caryl Flinn's analysis of the structural connection between nostalgia and music inspired by eighteenth century Romanticism in film can be of use to understanding the musical tones in *Wish You Were Here*. Flinn argues that non-representational music, like those seen in classical Hollywood films has "the ability to generate great degrees of affect," spurring a "impossible, plenitudes and nostalgic condition."¹¹³ Commonly used instruments in these films such as strings, woodwinds, and keys are the sounds are most prominent in making the soundscape of *Wish You Were Here*, especially during the nostalgic narrative beats. This use of music articulates the restorative narrative of nostalgia, a "return to the origins that characterizes the nostalgic experience,"¹¹⁴ in the metaphorical search for Tora-san. The film does this by repetitive use of a motif consisting of three ascending and one descending notes that play at numerous moments when Mitsuo loses himself in his memories, occasionally mixed with different instruments or at differing tempos.

These four notes play most often when Mitsuo reminisces about Izumi. It plays when the first images of Mitsuo and Izumi in high school appear, and also continues for longer during their first encounter in the bookstore. At the signing, Mitsuo is seen awkward and restless as a range of personalities come to compliment his work and request autographs. From a man who shakes Mitsuo's hand too hard, to an older woman who spreads rumors that he will win a

¹¹³ Caryl Flinn, *Strains of Utopia: Gender, Nostalgia, and Hollywood Film Music* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 10.

¹¹⁴ Sprengler, *Screening Nostalgia*, 77.

prestigious literary prize despite not knowing what it is, these set the lightness of the scene before Yamada swings the mood with his heartfelt encounter. Mitsuo has kept his head down this entire time, though when Izumi notices he isn't looking at her, she asks for him to add her name to the signature. When Mitsuo asks which character to use for Izumi, still with his head down, she responds with "like a spring" using the English word. As soon as Mitsuo writes her name, he stops and his eyes open wide. Suddenly, there is a cut to the Kanji character for spring in Izumi's name being written in the sand by the young Mitsuo, at the beach from his dream earlier. The same leitmotif plays on woodwind, as the camera pans up to the teenage Mitsuo hunched over the character he wrote, as the film cuts back to the adult Mitsuo hunched over the same way. Mitsuo is immediately sent back to his lovestruck teenage days and is at a loss for words. When Izumi leaves the signing for him to continue working, the character in the sand is washed over by the sea.¹¹⁵ The tune also plays during the first scene described, when Mitsuo sits down for a drink with his father. This tune is finally used to punctuate Mitsuo's self-transformation, when he finally confesses to Izumi in the airport about his wife. He apologizes for deceiving her, saying he didn't want to burden her, as the four notes play on piano over a close-up shot of Izumi's tearful face. Finally, the piano is heard once again when Mitsuo begins writing his new story, a full version of this song plays during the closing montage, analyzed in the next section. While this tune is the most repeated in *Wish You Were Here*, there is one other song that is used in the film that carries a great deal of nostalgic affect, the Tora-san theme song.

¹¹⁵ *Tora-san Wish You Were Here*, 00:42:15 to 00:45:04.

Opening Montage

Wish You Were Here's opening sequence serves the structural purpose of setting up the mood and ambience found in the film. The opening sequence here functions somewhat differently to that of the nostalgic film in Hollywood. The opening montage in the films Sprengler studies serves the purpose of serving "the social milieu of the filmic world."¹¹⁶ They may make reference to "historical references and the material culture of an era to situate the film temporally and to communicate the social status of the characters."¹¹⁷ The goal of these films' opening montages is to situate the viewer in the social or material world of the characters that will be a source for nostalgic affect. The ways that these montages are used in their respective narratives differ, but they generally serve to bring the viewer into the world of the characters, into the time-space of nostalgic longing or of lacking. However, *Wish You Were Here*'s opening sequence does the opposite. This opening instead brings Tora-san into the present, focusing entirely on the iconography of Tora-san, paying homage to him and the films he leads. This is because the opening of *Wish You Were Here* is separated narratively from the rest of the film, though it plays a vital role in creating the nostalgic tone of the film and establishing the reminiscence for Tora-san. With new vocals, footage, and a different figure on screen, this opening sequence is less concerned with a return to the time period of the films than it is with celebrating the icon of Tora-san as well as his signature song. In all previous films of the *Tora-san* series, the theme song "It's Tough Being a Man" is performed by Atsumi himself, however in *Wish You Were Here* that role is instead bequeathed to Kuwata, where he performs a new version of the song and himself expresses reverence for the man in the tan suit.

¹¹⁶ Sprengler, *Screening Nostalgia*, 78.

¹¹⁷ Sprengler, *Screening Nostalgia*, 78.

Kuwata's involvement is teased to the audience just after the dream sequence, when Yuri picks up a CD from the left of the frame and places it on a pile in the living room. This brings attention from to the right side of the frame, where Kuwata's popular album I LOVE YOU -Now & Forever- is displayed on the shelf. Using a close-up of Mitsuo's newly awoken face as a transition, the first notes of the *Tora-san* theme song plays signaling the opening montage. The montage begins with the title overlaid on a shot of the Edogawa riverbank, recognizable by the blue bridge and tower over the water. Tora-san is inconspicuously covered by the *yo* in *Otoko wa tsurai yo*, hinting at his presence in every part of the film. Atsumi is the first to be credited in his film as Tora-san; despite having passed away twenty four years before, he is still considered the protagonist or central figure of the film. The opening monologue begins, however it is the voice of Kuwata that is heard, not Tora-san's. After the credits for Sakura and Mitsuo, there is finally the first appearance of Tora-san himself in the form of an extreme close-up. Tora-san turns to the camera and gives a melancholic smile. This cut is taken directly from the very first appearance of Tora-san, from the opening credits of the first film, establishing the fifty year parallel. Not quite smiling not quite frowning, Tora-san's expression is both glad and pained at the same time, the simple man is still burdened by his own pathos reflecting the tone of the song. However, after such a long time of absence from the films, Tora-san here is no longer just looking out at the riverbank, but at the audience as well. His expression takes on new meaning, as one of reuniting with a good friend after many years, almost as if he is looking at the audience from the beyond. This prompts the audience to wear this expression as well upon seeing him, half way between happiness and tears. Tora-san's face fades into the clouds as Kuwata himself appears, sitting on top of a hill, singing the theme song. Kuwata's role here is not just as the singer of the updated song for the fiftieth anniversary, he is paying full homage to Tora-san in this opening sequence.

Kuwata dons his own tan suit and, by his side, rests a worn leather briefcase playing the role of Tora-san's iconic travel companion. As the song continues, a montage of long-shots of the Edogawa riverbank plays, taken from previous Tora-san films, and ends on a close-up of the iconic briefcase.¹¹⁸

When Kuwata finishes singing, he turns towards the lower left corner of the screen and extends his arm out in a gesture to help those in need, just like Tora-san would. However, as he begins Tora-san's speech, an image of Tora-san himself materializes beside Kuwata, from the sky looking down as if he was a guardian spirit. Kuwata is overacting, his face and body move in exaggerated motions whereas the image Tora-san is still and determined, but Kuwata's performance is nonetheless a passionate attempt to embody lovable fool. In the final moments of this opening, Kuwata suddenly disappears and leaves the spotlight to Tora-san to complete the speech.¹¹⁹ The ending of the song accompanies a shot of the Taishakuten temple's bell ringing with Yamada's director and writing credits on screen.

Along with this opening, *Wish You Were Here* also features an ending montage that is of key importance to the nostalgic experience of returning to this cinematic franchise. Mitsuo starts writing his next story with the sounds of rain and a light piano tune. As he writes the first few sentences, he becomes overwhelmed by his feelings for his uncle as an image of Tora-san's smiling face fades onto the screen, followed by a cut of Tora-san and Lily together. This begins the closing montage that features all of Tora-san's Madonnas across the previous forty-nine films. This montage is a quickfire of both happy and sad moments with Madonnas, laughing and crying, moments that visualized the romance between them and Tora-san. The only Madonna missing in

¹¹⁸ *Tora-san Wish You Were Here*, 02:30 to 05:21.

¹¹⁹ *Tora-san Wish You Were Here*, 05:21 to 05:43.

this montage is Reiko, who had her own flashback earlier. This montage is meant specifically for fans of Tora-san, receiving a flurry of nostalgic images through the cinematic technique of montage. Even viewers not familiar with the body of films in the series would get swept away by the highly sentimental music and the sight of Tora-san in so many locations and with so many women. Mitsuo doesn't know all these women himself, but he is still seen in tears during the montage. A few times within this montage, the camera cuts back to Mitsuo's face as tears begin to well in his eyes. His face only occupies a small portion of the frame, the large space signifying the longing he has for his uncle. As the music track reaches its climactic finish and the montage concludes, Mitsuo finally lets the tears fall on his face.¹²⁰ The opening and closing sequences of the film both use montage to nostalgically bring Tora-san and the cinematic features of the series into *Wish You Were Here* for heightened sentimental effect when combined with their music. The closing montage has a more somber sentiment, as Mitsuo's longing provides an on screen reflection of the longing for Tora-san, whereas the opening music is more joyous, celebrating Atsumi's theme song and the familiar imagery of Shibamata found in the series' opening montages, though with the interesting variance of casting Kuwata into the film rather than simply a performer.

Period Casting

The casting in *Wish You Were Here* is of crucial note because of the amount of original cast members who return to the set to reprise their roles. Period casting refers to the ways actors are selected for films based on their association with a particular time period. This type of casting "helps situate the narrative in a specific era by recalling past performances, genres, films,

¹²⁰ *Tora-san Wish You Were Here*, 1:48:36 to 1:52:26.

star personas or constructs of glamor.”¹²¹ This could be based on the ways an actor’s appearance or their voice can harken back to a cinematic time period of the past. Coupled with proper make-up, hairstyle, and costume, the present day actors can be made to embody a look and feel of a specific time period. On the other hand, *Wish You Were Here* does not use period casting to provide viewers with animated signs that bring us back to the times of the previous films; it is of course the editing of the memories that has that effect. Instead, the casting in itself is the sign of the specific era. Period casting actors can also draw a resemblance to actors from a specific time period, situating the narrative by cinematic link. In *Wish You Were Here*, this is taken a step further in that the cast are those same actors from the time era. Viewers are seeing the same actors both in the memories and in the present narrative. Instead of seeing an actor made to embody the look and atmosphere of the time of the series, those actors from that time themselves are cast in the film. Viewers see them both at a young age and an old age, embracing a feeling similar to seeing an old friend found in the opening montage.

The nostalgic casting affects both the audience and the cast themselves as almost no replacement casting had to be made for the main characters in *Wish You Were Here*. This adds an additional layer of nostalgia external to the film itself, as the cast members, too, are making a nostalgic pilgrimage back to the set and world of *Tora-san*. In a way, returning to create a *Tora-san* film with Yamada could be considered the actors’ own form of nostalgic consumption within their artistic careers. They have cultivated their own association with the time period by actually being there, both physically and cinematically. By returning to the set of *Wish You Were Here*, they are witnessing the development of their own character into the present day just as they themselves have. Small adaptations such as the handrail on the stairs to the living room are signs

¹²¹ Sprengler, *Screening Nostalgia*, 83.

of the adaptations their characters have made in the present. At the forefront of this period casting, Baishō has continued to play roles imbued with nostalgia for the postwar and high-growth era with Yamada, in films such as *Kabei: Our Mother*¹²² and *The Little House*.¹²³ Both refer back to periods of wartime and immediate postwar similar to *ALWAYS*, continuing into the high-growth era. As mentioned earlier, the return of nearly all the original cast members includes Gotō who, following the death of Atsumi, stopped appearing in films entirely and moved to France with her husband Jean Alesi. She had quit her acting career at that time, however did not pass up the opportunity to return to Japan and play Izumi again. As Mitsuo's Madonna, Izumi is such a major character of the film, and recasting Goto in that role was crucial in completing the period casting of *Wish You Were Here*.

Tora-san's Ghost

After the memorial service for Mitsuo's wife, Sakura sees Mitsuo and Yuri off at the Shibamata train station. Sakura asks Mitsuo about what happened to Izumi, and he answers that she left to Europe and probably is in a happy family, putting himself down in comparison. Sakura comforts him for saying how strong he is for quitting his job as a salaryman to become a novelist. As Sakura waves goodbye to Mitsuo and Yuri, the camera cuts to train doors opening with Tora-san entering instead, replaying a memory of Sakura saying goodbye at a train station. It's a touching scene as a leitmotif of the theme song plays when the young Sakura waves goodbye in tears. The present day Sakura keeps on walking, echoing Tora-san's words in the theme song. On her way back through the shopping street, the camera lingers above the Takagiya

¹²² *Kābē* [Kabei: Our Mother]. Directed by Yōji Yamada, Shōchiku, 2008.

¹²³ *Chiisai ouchi* [The Little House]. Directed by Yōji Yamada, Shōchiku, 2014.

shop.¹²⁴ In what is supposed to be a standard shot-reverse shot of Sakura in one shot and Mitsuo and Yuri getting onto the train in the other, Tora-san's presence is still manifest in the family bonds of the Suwa family. This can be seen as a flashback, interjecting into the chronological sequence of events an event from before the narrative, however, the way that flashbacks of Tora-san are included in the film differs from the conventional Hollywood film.

In the reappearance of Tora-san in this film, Yamada turns editing itself into a nostalgic sign. There are two main ways that Tora-san appears in the film. The first is through cinematic memory, scenes from previous films come in place of the characters' memories presented as flashback. These are full scenes are directly taken from their respective films, updated into high quality but unedited in their content. These scenes from the previous films are placed into a scene of *Wish You Were Here* when a character is reminded of Tora-san by some external trigger, offering an appropriate moment to place these scenes into the narrative. Nearly every memory in *Wish You Were Here* contains Tora-san, except for ones remembered by Izumi, though, on occasion even her memories not directly related to Tora-san can still have the man in them. This is the case when Mitsuo and Izumi are catching up in the coffeeshop when Mitsuo remembers the time he finally confessed his love to Izumi on the beach, from the forty-eighth film. However, Tora-san and Lily are also part of the film where the confession happens too. As such, in this scene the youngsters at the beach are contrasted by the aging Tora-san and Lily, who stand at the head of the beach, feeling bittersweet at the blooming love in front of them. This use of memory is employed to its most sentimental effect in a break during the closing montage. After another shot with Lily, the music slows down and quiets while Tora-san begins speaking, standing proud in the next cut. He speaks in a polite tone, unusual for Tora-san, confessing: "A loser like me

¹²⁴ *Tora-san Wish You Were Here*, 29:05 to 30:19.

might get laughed at a time like this, but I believe my nephew Mitsuo did nothing wrong. He travelled far to mend the heart of a lonely girl, unknown to his parents. Mitsuo rode his bike all that way. I'd rather commend him for his noble act."¹²⁵ By editing in scenes from previous films into appropriate points in *Wish You Were Here*, the memories of the characters double as the memories of fans of the series, shared by the cinematic connection, endowing them with an affective light.

The second way that Tora-san appears in the film is achieved once again through editing, that is by placing Tora-san directly into *Wish You Were Here*. This only occurs during three brief moments in the film, but these moments carry heavy significance for Mitsuo. After his conversation with Yuri about remarriage, Mitsuo becomes lost in his thoughts about love and in this scene he says to himself "Uncle...you helped me a lot back then." At that moment Tora-san fades into the couch behind him with a whimsical piano tune and sound effect playing. He only appears for a moment, looking at Mitsuo, then vanishes again.¹²⁶ He appears again when Mitsuo is having the beer with his father, when his narration turns to longing for his uncle. Mitsuo narrates: "If he was here right now, I'd tell him how sad I feel, and how much I will miss Izumi when I say goodbye to her tomorrow."¹²⁷ Tora-san fades in on the stairs behind him, looking over Mitsuo one more time before disappearing again. Finally, at the very end of the film, Mitsuo begins writing his new novel. After he writes the first few sentences, the camera cuts to a shot facing Mitsuo as Tora-san fades in once again behind him, but this, time it's Tora-san who speaks. He declares "Mitsuo. If you ever need help, say my name into the wind, and I'll come

¹²⁵ *Tora-san Wish You Were Here*, 1:50:33 to 1:51:20.

¹²⁶ *Tora-san Wish You Were Here*, 34:00 to 34:20.

¹²⁷ *Tora-san, Wish You Were Here*, 1:40:50 to 1:41:08.

running to you.”¹²⁸ In all three instances of Tora-san’s ghost, Mitsuo looks to his uncle to support him for what comes next in the narrative. First, he reminisces about Tora-san when thinking about Izumi before meeting her. Then, he longs for his uncle to sympathize with his feelings of letting go of his Madonna. Finally, as Mitsuo has completed his journey and is ready to put his feelings for his uncle into words, Tora-san comes to him offering his nephew his help at any time. Through the editing of Tora-san into the film, Yamada not only brings back Atsumi as a central figure of the film but also links memory together with cinema. The memories of the characters are the cinematography of the Tora-san series, a cultural product of the high-growth and bubble eras. Additionally, Tora-san himself is recast as a guiding figure for Mitsuo, literally looking over his nephew from beyond and becoming a source of comfort in Mitsuo’s times of need.

¹²⁸ *Tora-san, Wish You Were Here*, 1:48:19 to 1:48:29.

CHAPTER VII:

CONCLUSION: CINEMATIC MEMORY AS CULTURAL MEMORY

The film's cinematography, writing, music, and acting, are all imbued with a nostalgic effect that harkened back to the sentimental image from the earlier films, but also brought the world and characters into a modern setting. While the film features a narrative centered on Mitsuo, the story lingers on the absence of Tora-san in the present lives of the characters, and the longing they feel for him, owing to the English title *Wish You Were Here*, taken from the Pink Floyd album. However, instead of the themes of emotional withdrawal caused by absence of former singer Syd Barrett in the Pink Floyd album,¹²⁹ *Wish You Were Here* engages fully with its emotional ties to Tora-san, reliving both his comedic and heartfelt moments to nostalgically bring him back from the high-growth and bubble eras into the present Reiwa era. This cinematic image of Japan, with its anti-salaryman performance, vanishing spaces, and strong affections for family and community, is what is being reconstructed in *Wish You Were Here*. Tora-san, a figure of a comforting image of past, is recast in this film's present as a guiding force for the protagonist of this film, aiding him in his future.

The film plays on the memories the characters and fans together have for the kind-hearted drifter, but does not require audiences to possess a deep knowledge of the franchise. Even without Atsumi, Tora-san's presence is felt throughout the film. His presence is undeniable as the characters frequently reminisce about the impact of Tora-san in their lives and share memories they had with him. This reminiscence can be triggered by events as direct as returning character from the previous films or by a simple motion such as waving goodbye or looking up

¹²⁹ Andrew Leahey "Behind the Song: Pink Floyd, 'Wish You Were Here,'" *American Songwriter*, accessed April 11, 2021, <https://americansongwriter.com/wish-you-were-here-pink-floyd-behind-the-song/>.

the stairs. It is not just the characters that are overcome by nostalgia for Tora-san, but the film itself is, using the medium of film to relive the memories of the icon. In selecting already existing scenes from previous films as flashbacks, a layering effect occurs as these scenes are already part of a collective knowledge of the *Tora-san* series, doubling them as visual representation of the audiences' memories as well.

The ubiquity and usage of these cinematic moments of *Tora-san* as memories for both character and audience prompts a much larger observation. Yamada reassesses the relationship between the past and present through the utilization of these cinematic objects. Flashbacks in the film are exact replicas of past memories, those moments in themselves as they were. Generally, human memory is prone to become corrupted by time; we are unable to recall a memory exactly the way it happened. However, these cinematic memories not only recall the moments of the past, but are those moments themselves, uncorrupted by time. By way of cinematic technique, these uncorrupted memories find their way into the film, into the present day, and, as such, into our memories once again. With *Wish You Were Here*, rather than a soba chef, Yamada works as a surgeon, re-suturing the past in the context of the present. Yamada stitches in the cinematic moments of a specific period of Japanese history as felt memories within a present day narrative. His needle consists of the music, editing, casting, and opening sequence, and these allow for the seamless embedding of the past in the present. The past is very much a figment of the present, Yamada reminds us.

If cinematic memory and human memory have fundamental differences, then the question of identification follows. Human activities that create memories are eventually meant to fade, followed by death or to be passed on and reiterated in the form of a new memory. However, the flashbacks of the *Tora-san* series are a product that have not faded over twenty-two years,

they are represented exactly as they were during that time and recontextualized for the present. Can this cinematic product, untainted by time, bear the same name as the human product of memory, which fundamentally is subject to time? Previously in this study, I have added the modifying term “cinematic” to call these products memories, however the act itself of calling them “cinematic” may obscure this fundamental difference between it and human memory. Does the cultural ubiquity of the cinematic image overlay or replace the human memory due to its incorruptibility? The ways that the cinematic image interacts with the recontextualization of human memory in the present is grounds for further investigation.

Yamada Yōji has achieved an incredible cinematic feat. He has directed or written all forty-nine films in the longest film series in the world to star the same actor, and returned to the directing seat for the fiftieth entry, two decades later. He now has over one hundred films to his name and is still producing films after *Wish You Were Here*, releasing *It's a Flickering Life* in 2021.¹³⁰ Yamada is a director that has stood through Japanese cinema history, heralding from the early days of the golden age of Japanese cinema and creating movies until the present, remaining loyal to Shōchiku Studios the entire time. In researching the cinematic world of *Tora-san* and the reincarnation of the cultural icon of Tora-san in *Wish You Were Here*, I have brought together a dissection of a cinematic image cultivated by the *Tora-san* series with a close reading of the sentimental nostalgia of the milestone film. I have analyzed the ways that the film renders nostalgia for a specific period of Japanese social and cultural history through its longing for the iconic figure Tora-san. The three forms of nostalgia is part of an understanding of how memory is represented in the cinematic medium. Further investigation is required on cinema's place in human memory, however, within Japanese culture, Tora-san appears to occupy a moving image

¹³⁰ *Kinema no kamisama* [It's a Flickering Life]. Directed by Yōji Yamada, Shōchiku, 2021.

in the memory of a warm, comforting image within Japan's high economic growth and capitalist society.

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