



The Modern-Day Family Without Tora-san

YAMADA Yoji (Director) and BAISHO Chieko (Actress)
(Edited: IKUSHIMA Jun)

From Otoko wa Tsurai yo (It's tough being a man) to his latest Chiisai Ouchi (The little house), movie director Yamada Yoji has continued to portray the Japanese family for more than half a century. What has the Japanese family in the Heisei period lost from Showa?

BAISHO Chieko: I heard that with your latest, *Chiisai Ouchi (The Little House)*, it's already been fifty years since *Shitamachi no Taiyo (The Sunshine Girl, 1963)*, which we worked on together. We've come a long way, haven't we?



YAMADA Yoji (left) and Baisho Chieko as Tkai in the movie, *Chiisai Ouchi (The Little House)*
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YAMADA Yoji: The movie *Otoko wa Tsurai yo* was started in 1969.

Baisho: *Torajiro Kurenai no Hana*, which was the last of the *Otoko wa Tsurai yo* series was released in 1995, so it lasted twenty-six years.

Yamada: Looking back, the Kurumas in that series was a collapsed family. I mean, Tora-san (main character of the series), the family successor, had left home and was missing. Sakura (Tora-san's



sister-in-law, Baisho played)′s parents had died at an early age. At any rate, I had wanted to start with a family that was not exactly happy.

Baisho: So that was how it started.

Yamada: Tora-san, who Atsumi Kiyoshi-san played, and Sakura, who you played, were half-siblings with different mothers, and their parents were gone. Yet the sister was raised under a loving uncle and aunt. That was the setup I came up with. I wanted to set the stage for a family with little blood relationship because I believed that blood is not the most important aspect for a family.

Baisho: The family turned out to have quite a deep relationship despite the lack of blood ties, didn't it?

Chiisai Uchi (The Little House), the latest work by movie director Yamada Yoji (82), released January 25, 2014. It is based on Nakajima Kyoko's Naoki Prize-winning novel. It is set in the early Showa period, when Taki (Kuroki Hana) leaves the snowy Tohoku region to come serve as a maid at a house with a red roof in the suburbs of Tokyo. The story develops around the illicit love affairs of its mistress, Tokiko (Matsu Takako), and Itakura Masaharu (Yoshioka Hidetaka). [Kuroki won the Silver Bear for Best Actress at the Berlin International Film Festival]

Sixty years later and living in the Heisei period, Taki (Baisho Chieko) takes her nephew's son Takeshi's (Tsumabuki Satoshi) suggestion and begins writing an autobiography in a college notebook. Each incident Taki had kept secret unravels one after another. Yamada, who had always portrayed family ties, takes on a family secret in this latest work.



The movie *Chiisai Uchi (The Little House)* portrays the two eras of Showa and Heisei. Left: Matsu Takako and Kuroki Hana (right) in Showa. Right: Tsumabuki (left) and Baisho Chieko in Heisei.

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Baisho: When I first read the novel, I had the impression it was a romance mystery.

Yamada: It was quite thrilling, wasn't it? You felt, "What's going to happen to Itakura and the



housewife Tokiko?” It was written in a way that hints at the two people’s relationships, like, “Really? It can’t be!” which I thought was skillful.

Baisho: From her position as a housemaid, Taki was really concerned about the mistress’s situation, but I felt that Taki herself was young and attracted to Itakura.

Yamada: I’m sure that’s how it was. Before the war, *jochu-san* (housemaid) was a decent job. Today, the word is often considered discriminatory, but it wasn’t like that at all.

Baisho: And there’s a scene where I explain exactly that to Tsumabuki.

Yamada: The young Taki first serves at a mansion in Hongo belonging to a writer, played by Hashizume Isao, then shifts to a different house in the suburbs. Mansions in Hongo or Shirokane usually had about three maids working in a single house. Even many smaller homes in the suburbs outside the Yamanote Line had maids.

Baisho: The houses weren’t so big, so they couldn’t help but become a member of the family.

Yamada: They had to be treated like a family member.

Baisho: Which naturally makes them privy to family secrets.

Yamada: Families today no longer have any “outsiders.” There aren’t too many visitors, and relatives don’t come to stay either. In the old days, when students went to take school entrance exams in Tokyo, they didn’t stay at a *ryokan* or hotel; they always went to stay at their relatives’ or acquaintances’ houses. That experience, I feel, was in fact truly important in getting to know the world and people. Young people learned through constraints that each house has its own culture.

Baisho: We had to be conscious of the house members, so we naturally learned manners and behavior.

Yamada: It’s in fact troublesome for the family that accepts the visitor as well. To let a student stay, they had to open up someone’s room, and if they didn’t have that convenience, the student had to sleep in the same room as the father of the house, who he met for the first time.



Tsumabuki Satoshi and Baisho Chieko
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Hashizume Isao (left) and Yoshiyuki Kazuko
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Baisho: The one staying had to have certain manners. He would take a souvenir to the house and find the right timing to hand it to the family.

Yamada: Or he would always have to say “good morning.” And he even had to find the right moment to go to the toilet because houses usually have only one. [Laughs]

Baisho: These are all things that come into use when you become an adult.

Yamada: In the movie, young Taki becomes a resident housemaid and learns housework and manners. Kuroki Hana plays the young Taki and you play the older Taki sixty years later. I think that Taki didn’t have too many friends during the sixty years. She’s a little stubborn, and I don’t think her apartment that she lived in ever became all that cheerful.

Baisho: She never married, so it’s quite interesting to know how she had lived the sixty years. I wonder if she had anyone she loved. I personally hate eating alone. I’d rather not eat than eat alone. [Laughs]

The aged Taki lives alone, but we see that she keeps her room clean and lives neatly. It all comes from her experience as a housemaid. During her housemaid days, she and the mistress always cleaned the house every evening. They even wiped down the trash buckets. She’s using a vacuum cleaner today, but the work of polishing with her hands was a memorable impression for me.

Yamada: I learned a lot about cleaning from the writings of Koda Aya. For example, you would fold a *zokin* (dust cloth) in four, and once you use all four surfaces of a single side, you put it in the bucket. When you’ve used up all the dust cloths you have, you scrub it clean in water, and carefully wring each one dry. Then you start using each one again.

Baisho: Oh, you rinse after you use all four surfaces? Not after just one?

Yamada: And when you use it, you wipe with your hands fully flat on it. That’s why big cloths don’t work.



Takaoka Takatatro and Matsu Takako



Matsu, Akiyama Satoshi and Kataoka



Matsu and Yoshioka Hidetaka



Kuroki Hana and Matsu



Kimura Fumino and Tsumabuki Satoshi

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Baisho: Palm-sized?

Yamada: That's right. You use the full power of your hand that way. Koda's books also taught me how to dust and sweep. Koda Aya had said that although she never got to use all of them, she had learned these cleaning methods from her father.

Baisho: That was the novelist Koda Rohan, wasn't it?

Yamada: It tells that men of the Meiji period knew how to clean. But right around the 1960s and '70s, when I married, electric vacuum cleaners came out, and I thought that was truly great. Couples all over Japan dreamed of buying one someday no matter what the cost. It was a true revolution in life.



Baisho Chieko

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Baisho: I personally have clearer memories of my childhood days when I washed clothes using a washing board. Scrubbing with just the power of your hands won't work, so you had to use your whole body to get the stains off. I was one of five children of our family, so we'd do *janken* (rock-paper-scissors) to decide who would cook the rice, open the rain shutters, sweep the garden, or whatever else, and we split the chores.

Yamada: Weren't there ones that slacked off, who said, "I don't want to do that!"

Baisho: Of course there were, but not me. [Laughs]

Yamada: That, too, is what makes a family, isn't it? Today, parents take chores away from the kids and say, "You just study and make it into a good school," which I think is leaving kids unemployed.



They grow up without learning what's most important, and when they don't use their bodies to do tedious tasks like housework, it ends up affecting the brain's development. The people of my generation who worked desperately after recovering from the war to earn a fulfilling life are kind of dumbfounded now, as if it's like, "Hmm, was this how it was supposed to be?"

The 1970s – Desperately pursuing dreams

Yamada: Having passed eighty and gradually coming to say goodbye to this world, I meet with old friends to talk about the past, and we somehow agree that our generation was most fulfilling right around when we married and started living in a *danchi* (housing complex). It was just around the late '60s to early '70s. Living in a *danchi* was our dream back then. I first lived in one too. The apartment didn't have a bath so we had to go out to a public bath, but it was our dream to buy the 3Cs: color TV, cooler (air conditioner) and car. The '70s were times when we were desperately trying to achieve that dream.

Baisho: That was right around when you started shooting *Otoko wa Tsurai yo*, wasn't it?

Yamada: That's right. I feel that our country was good around that time. Our generation had been trained in postwar democracy, so entering the *danchi* we immediately formed a local autonomy that served as groundwork to developing a community that talked with each other to solve various problems. We met every month and talked about matters such as whether to have a nursery made, or when the car age came whether cars should take up space on the street. Until around the '70s, residents had the habit of sharing problems of the community, discussing them and making decisions. Even in terms of the entire society, the government made seniors' medical care free, and I remember feeling really reassured that we wouldn't need to pay hospital fees when we grew old.

Baisho: But today, the individual burden of medical costs keeps rising. It's a tough age now.

Yamada: People were so desperate to realize their dreams in the 1970s, and when they finally achieved them, they began wondering, "Are we really happy now?"

Baisho: I've always been busy moving forward, so I'm fulfilled *now* — "*Imadeshō!*" as they say. [Laughs] I feel I've finally got the time after turning seventy that I can stop and look back at the past. The 1970s for me were so fulfilling in terms of work, having done *Otoko wa Tsurai yo* and worked with you on *Kazoku (Family, 1970)* and *Kokyo (home, 1972)*.

Yamada: Oh, that's right. You were *so* busy during your twenties, weren't you?

Baisho: I was constantly repeating the process of going somewhere on work and coming back, so I never had the time to really look back. I'm finally able to go see other people's concerts or talk about subjects other than work. These days, I'm saving up travel funds with female friends of mine, and this is quite fun. I've had many friends who I've gotten acquainted with through work, but now I meet people away from work. I'm getting to know at this age that society is full of many kinds of



people and is so fun.

The culture called an annual event

Yamada: There's a scene in the first *Otoko wa Tsurai yo* movie where Tora-san comes home in the evening, and Atsumi-san, instead of saying "*Tadaima*" (I'm home), says to her uncle and aunt, "Thank you folks, for another day hard worked."

Baisho: I can imagine Atsumi-san saying that.

Yamada: That line wasn't in the script. Atsumi-san had improvised it, but it was a shocking line for me. A discovery that this was how the people of *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.

Baisho: I never knew such a thing had happened.

Yamada: I really liked how everyone exchanged "Thanks for the hard work" greetings with others. The sun sets, the crows caw, and the father comes home from work. Everyone then sits at the dining table. I had thought for a moment that that kind of life was already disappearing from this country back then in the late 1960s.

Baisho: The meal would be prepared on an *ozen* (four-legged tray), the father would sit down, after which everyone else would sit and say, "*Itadakimasu*." That's how it was in the old days.

Yamada: The round *chabudai* (low table) must have been one of the greatest inventions of the Japanese common people from the Taisho to Showa periods. An *ozen* would create ranks, but when everyone sits at a round table, you don't have ranks. It changed relations within the family.

Baisho: The Kurumaya family was square. The actors all had set places to sit, and it was really like a family.

Yamada: But the Tako-shacho would sit at the *agarikamachi* (entrance step) and not come up on the *tatami*. [Laughs] He wouldn't come in unless someone says, "Shacho, do come in." In a way, he's a quasi-family member.

Baisho: Positions and roles were pretty much determined, and whenever the broth-boiled taro was ready, the aunt was always the one that brought it.

Yamada: Japan had already changed a lot at the time of the first *Otoko wa Tsurai yo*. In the early Showa days at which *Chiisai Ouchi* is set, the life with a *chabudai* in the living room and a meal of *natto* (fermented soybeans) and miso soup wasn't really the standard notion of a good life. The idea that a good life was to have not a *zashiki* (sitting room) but rather a reception room where they had a record player and ideally a piano likely held a firm place within the urban people of the time.



Baisho: That record player that appears in the movie was originally yours, wasn't it?

Yamada: I treasured it, but I couldn't keep it any longer and donated it to a props company. I decided to use it for *Chiisai Ouchi*.

Baisho: We were a family of seven, and I have more memories of times I spent with my father than of items. I often went fishing with my father. When we moved from our evacuation site in Ibaraki to Takinogawa, Tokyo, we went to the swamp to fish for crucian carp. I also recall that on every New Year's holiday, my father would tell us to call our friends over. It was a small house and it was filled with people, but my mother made all kinds of food, which was a great memory.

Yamada: I don't think it's bad at all to have an annual event like New Year's and have a certain set of rules. They do become a hassle, but each one of these events from old — like going to the shrine on this day, or doing an *obon* event — had the strong significance of tying the family together.

Baisho: Communities around the country are reevaluating festivals these days. I think it's valuable for us Japanese to, say, do the *mukae-bi* and *okuri-bi* (ceremonial fire lighting) on *obon*.

Yamada: Having certain rules is one aspect of culture. Of course, there are some rules that we should give up on. But I think we Japanese had so many rules that we needed to have observed. In *Chiisai Ouchi*, the folks welcomed guests on New Year's in the reception room rather than a tatami room, but few people today maintain the custom of inviting guests on New Year's.

Baisho: *Otoko wa Tsurai yo* was always released either on *obon* or New Year's, right? On these times of the year that are so important to the Japanese.

Yamada: The role of Sakura that you played was someone who was living very intellectually. She carefully measured and maintained an appropriate distance between family members and worked things so that everyone could live peacefully. She knows the techniques for living, so to speak.

Baisho: I don't think I was ever conscious of that in my acting.

Yamada: For a big family to live under a single roof, I think there needed to be a rule that says each must understand the other's position. Even when they fought they probably knew the one thing they must not say. That reminds me: In the filming of *Otoko wa Tsurai yo*, the actors were so lively every time we shot a fight scene, weren't they?

Baisho: They'd shout out loud and go all out to curse each other.

Yamada: When the uncle says, "So I'll hang myself and die!" Tora-san comes back with, "Good, I'll help you then." But the two knew that by then someone would cut in and stop them. The roles demanded it, so to speak.

Baisho: It's almost like pro wrestling. [Laughs]



Yamada: That's true. When Tora-san says, "I'm leaving," Sakura stops him. There are always all kinds of rules in the roots of family life. I feel that Sakura was a woman who valued them in daily life.

Baisho: You may be right.

Yamada: When we look back, the postwar age was half a century of people gradually losing the sense of valuing daily fulfillment in life. You could even say that it was taken away. People are given an extreme goal from others and are forced to compete in reaching it. I can't help feel that people treat life roughly. As I said to begin with, I felt when doing *Otoko wa Tsurai yo* that there's something more important than blood that makes a family a family. Sakura represented that feeling, and she had the wisdom on how to live happily with many people.

Baisho: Come to think of it, the Kurumaya family had many people coming in and out.

Yamada: That family was accustomed to accommodating visitors. [Laughs] Although it turned into a workplace whenever Tora-san returned. They would bring in an amazingly beautiful woman and start fussing, "Come on, bring in some food!" and they wouldn't hesitate to tell that woman, "These guys here are all poor," or, "They're idiots." [Laughs]

Baisho: Really terrible. And they say all they want, and they leave. I found out hearing you just now: I never realized it myself, but I was learning through playing Sakura in *Otoko wa Tsurai yo* the importance of developing relationships between people. And it had become a part of me before I knew it.

Yamada: I've heard that Atsumi-san wasn't necessarily blessed with a great family either. Mine was quite tough as well, but I've thought and learned a lot while making the Tora-san movies.

An age where we see what we don't want to

Yamada: Peter Brook, a great director of the twentieth century, once said something along the lines of, "I thought that the job of a director was to explain the psychology and emotional shifts of characters comprehensibly, like a psychoanalyst, but I recently realized that actors are far better psychoanalysts than directors." I've worked with Atsumi-san and you for a long time and discovered how each of you live your roles and express them, which I've accepted and fed off. It's the repetition of that process that's brought me here.

Baisho: It's important to see yourself objectively, isn't it? I think it was about thirty years ago when you told me how Yamamoto Yasue, who played the protagonist Tsu in *Yuzuru* 1,037 times, had said, "When I stand on stage, there's me, and there's the other me, and it's when the latter controls me that a stage will be successful." Ever since, I've always tried keeping the other me on stage, whether it be a concert or a movie set.



Yamada: Yes, I remember saying that.

Baisho: Even in life, I sometimes feel, “Am I really OK like this?” That’s when the other Chieko tells me, “Hey, aren’t you a little strange?” I’m running my flipbook life every day thinking like that, but when in *Chiisai Ouchi* I had a line that went, “You know, I’ve lived too long,” I thought it was amazing.

Yamada: That was a line that wasn’t in the original script but I added because I wanted something there.

Baisho: You were muttering something onsite, and then you said that line. I said, “Oh, that’s a great line. Whose is it?” and you said, “You.” I was surprised. I’ve done so many roles to this day, but I think it was the most wonderful line ever. That reminds me, you had laughed and said, “Maybe I’ve lived too long too.”

Yamada: The people of my generation feel that we’re now in an age in which we’re starting to see what we don’t want to see. But I want to strictly condemn anyone who thinks about the dark future of Japan with the notion of, “Hey, I’ll already be dead by then.” Our generation has a huge responsibility for the future of this country. There’s a scene in *Chiisai Ouchi* that shows how the entire nation of Japan rejoiced over the announcement that Tokyo would host the 1940 Olympics, which is quite similar to our situation today. The 1940 Olympics were cancelled because of the war, and then the 1964 Olympics in Tokyo after the war dramatically changed Japan. Had we changed in the right direction? How will this country and the world be when we host the 2020 Olympics? I’m quite worried.

Baisho: Oh don’t say that... Please do live much, much longer and make more great movies for us.

Note: *Chiisai Ouchi* is distributed by SHOCHIKU Co., Ltd. (<http://www.shochiku.com/>). The movie’s official site (Japanese only): <http://www.chiisai-ouchi.jp/>

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YAMADA Yoji, Film Director

BAISHO Chieko, Actress
