These 10 Films Mirror The Complicated Lives Of Japan’s Contemporary Families

The Many Faces Of The Japanese Household

Get those tissues ready because these movies will make you laugh, cry, or both.

Ever wondered what happens behind closed doors in your average, or not-so-average, Japanese family home?

It probably all started with Tokyo Story (1953).

If you haven’t seen this Japanese classic about how modern, postwar life affected the traditional Japanese family, you need to ASAP. Yasujiro Oji’s 20th-century masterpiece set the tone for Japanese cinema and is still the unofficial benchmark many Japanese directors use when it comes to portraying family drama on the silver screen.

These 10 handpicked movies delve into the private lives of Japanese families — each with their own stories, feelings, problems and milestones. They also ask important questions that often remain unanswered in ever-so-busy Japan: what is family love; what makes up a real family, and how can family bonds — or the lack of them — affect one’s life and future? Most of these films are minimalist and slow-paced, allowing the viewer to savor all the emotions and tiny details depicted on screen. A lesson in Japanese cinema in and of itself.

Tokyo Sonata strips away the public mask of the average middle-class Japanese family. In the Sasaki family, everything is not as it seems because everyone has secrets. The father is a salaryman who loses his job but doesn’t tell his family. The firstborn son wants to join the U.S. military. The youngest wants piano lessons and the mother is just trying to hold down the fort at home. Get ready for drama when all the secrets come to light.

2. Rebirth (2011) （八日目の蝉）
This film is based on an acclaimed book by Mitsuyo Kakuta. It’s about a baby, Erina, who is kidnapped from her biological parents and spends her formative years with her kidnapper/mother, the father’s former lover—until she’s returned to her real parents. Adult Erina, now carrying the child of a married man, struggles with conflicting feelings towards her biological parents and her kidnapper/mother and must confront the past in order to find closure. The movie copped 10 prizes at the Japanese Academy Awards in 2012 including Best Picture, Best Director, Best Leading Actress, and Best Supporting Actress.

3. What A Wonderful Family! (2016) （家族はつらいよ）
If you’re looking for a family drama on the lighter side, check out the *What A Wonderful Family!* trilogy (two sequels were released in 2017 and 2018). After 50 years of marriage, a grumpy old man’s wife wants a divorce, and the family doesn’t know how to handle it. A family meeting to discuss the issue turns into an unfortunate series of events that is bound to make you chuckle.

4. **Like Father, Like Son (2013)** (そして父になる)
Looking for an excellent family drama that explores the age-old nature versus nurture debate? Look no further than *Like Father, Like Son*. Because of a bungle at a hospital, two babies are switched at birth and raised by families on two different ends of the social class spectrum. When the hospital owns up to its mistake years later, each family has to decide whether to keep the child they raised or switch him for their biological son. This one won several international awards, including the Jury Prize at Cannes in 2013.

**5. The Eight Year Engagement (2017) （8年越しの花嫁 奇跡の実話）**
Based on a true story, this movie may make you believe in love again. Hisashi (Takeru Sato) and Mai (Tao Tsuchiya) are a young couple who must deal with a surprising but devastating condition that takes a toll on Mai. A month prior to their wedding, she is struck with a grave illness, which leaves her with amnesia as far as Hisashi is involved. While everyone begins to lose faith in their relationship, Hisashi keeps booking the same wedding venue year after year ... in hopes that one day he will eventually walk down the aisle with Mai. The chemistry between Sato and Tsuchiya is palpable on screen in this one. This box office-favorite was also nominated for four awards at the Japanese Academy Awards.

Brace yourself. This movie directed by the acclaimed, award-winning director Hirokazu Koreeda, is not your average happy-go-lucky Tokyo family story. What happens when a mother leaves her four kids in an apartment and never returns? Inspired by true events, this poignant tale reveals the seedy underbelly of Tokyo life where kids could be living without parents next door and you wouldn’t even know it. This film delivers solid performances by the cast, particularly by then child actor Yuya Yagira who won Best Actor at Cannes for his performance.

In *Still Walking*, another gem by Koreeda, tension simmers under the surface at a yearly family reunion that commemorates the death of a son who died while saving a friend from drowning. To add insult to injury, the friend whose life was saved is always invited to the reunion and forced to hear about how great the dead son was.

In *Our Little Sister*, three adult sisters living in Kamakura meet their teenaged half-sister for the first time when their estranged father dies. What follows includes an exploration of each sister’s perspective on how their chilly relationships with their parents have affected their present romantic connections. This adaptation of a popular manga by Akimi Yoshida also won Best Picture and Best Director at the Japanese Academy Awards in 2016.

9. **Papa’s Lunchbox Is the Best In The World** （パパのお弁当は世界一）
In Japan, it’s a common stereotype that the okaasan (mom) makes the bento (lunchbox) while the otousan (dad) goes go off to work. This movie, based on a true story, challenges this stereotype when a single dad has to make bentos for his high school daughter. Although she is initially embarrassed by his attempts, his bento-making skills gradually improve and reflect his love and commitment to his child.

10. Shoplifters (2018) （万引き家族）
The family that shoplifts together stays together, right? This is the basic premise of another Koreeda movie on the not-so-perfect Japanese family. However, things get messy when the family decides to take in a young girl and they’re accused of kidnapping by the authorities. In true Koreeda style, this movie makes the viewer question what makes a family a family — is it just biological or is it the love that transcends blood ties?

And there you have it — 10 fantastic heartwarming titles that will bring light to so many types of Japanese family drama to get you through winter. Happy movie night!

What is your favorite Japanese movie? Let us know in the comments below.