Document Citation

Title	**The waves at Genji's door -- excerpt**
Author(s)	Joan Mellen
Source	*Pantheon Books*
Date	1976
Type	book excerpt
Language	English
Pagination	156-159
No. of Pages	4
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Chichi ariki (There was a father), Ozu, Yasujiro, 1942

Mellen

tarian patriarch, replacing her dead father, whom the role, if not the personality, of Hitler well suits. Neither brother nor sister finds this comparison with Hitler offensive or outrageous. And a moment later, nervous over his imminent introduction to Tokiko, Setsuko's friend and a potential bride-to-be, Shojiro compares himself to "Siegfried" whose weakness, like his own, was that he was shy. Japanese culture had indeed been Teutonized. In the year that *The Brothers and Sisters of the Toda Family* was released, Japan would declare war on the United States as Germany's strongest ally.

There Was a Father, also directed by Ozu in the middle of the war, contains many of the attitudes encouraged during this period of extreme nationalism. It is set, "democratically," among the lower middle class, thus serving wartime propaganda about the "classlessness" of Japanese society. It exalts the patriarch and, like *The Brothers and Sisters of the Toda Family*, applauds the son's carrying on family traditions after his father's death. This approval is justified by the beauty of the father's character and his absolute devotion to his responsibility as a member of society. The subservience of women is implicitly endorsed in this film about a motherless family, which manages spiritually so well. It is as if a father alone can best pass on to his son all that is most noble in Japanese tradition.

There Was a Father opens with the father, Horikawa, a geometry teacher, lecturing his students. In the classroom sequence the typical low Ozu angle, looking up at the teacher from three feet off the floor, expresses and sanctions his power and value. It is as if we were sitting on tatami, gazing at him in awe, like his students at their desks. On a class trip, one of the students drowns. The teacher assumes complete responsibility for this tragedy, although he had forbidden the students to go boating, and is technically not at fault. When the students rush out, having heard that one of the boats has overturned, Ozu remains focused on their umbrellas lined up in the corridor. All those in the right row remain upright; the one stray umbrella, alone on the left side of the shot, represents the disorderly, disobedient student who drowned. In the ensuing confusion, this umbrella falls over.

Startling to Western eyes is the sight of a schoolteacher destroying his entire career as a result of an accident not his fault. Yet once the tragedy occurs, the issue becomes not one of individual responsibility in which someone who is "to blame" must be punished, but that collective good will among parents, students, and teacher has been irreparably damaged. The harmonious relationship previously enjoyed by these three groups is severed. Recognizing this fait accompli, the teacher has no choice but to resign, for he can no longer function for his students in a role in which each party implicitly trusts the other, as an infant would his mother.

The teacher and father of the film's title believes he must somehow not have done his best, introducing Ozu's main theme in this film, the need for us all to do our duty with the utmost effort. Ozu never suggests that this effort is to be in service of the war, and, in fact, stresses only that it is for the good of society in general. But in this advocacy of duty, Ozu could

not have made a more subtle appeal to the Japanese to support the war, since in 1942 their utmost effort for the social good could only have been seen in the military context.

Everything to come in the film suggests that the father was correct to resign. However painful the decision, absolute responsibility must occasionally be assumed, even when one is not personally at fault. The individual must be ready obediently to submit whenever the situation demands that he do so.

Father and son return to Ueda, the father's home town. They are bound together in whatever life brings. At a local castle which they visit, the son lies about liking Ueda, throwing rocks off a height and manifesting the moral bravado characterizing all good Japanese men. "If you grew up here," he tells his father, "*I* can grow up here."

As a model father, Horikawa presses his son to study hard to pass his high school entrance examinations. Otherwise, in what would be an unpleasant fate indeed, he will be a "nobody." When the son, applying all his diligence, gets a mathematics problem right, the father rewards him first with praise, "Good! Wasn't that easy?" and then with a fishing trip. In a beautiful high-angle shot the camera looks down at their two figures standing in identical positions with their legs spread apart. They cast their fishing rods in parallel motion, in unison, first to the right and then to the left. The image expresses Ozu's message that the son fulfills his duty best by emulating this good father, who expresses his own value in providing so noble an example for his son.

The father returns to Tokyo to seek a better job in order to finance the son's education. From the boy, who must remain at school in Ueda, an extreme form of stoicism is required. The little son is told that he is no longer a child, although he clearly is, and that he should "act like a man" and not cry. "Both of us," says the father, "must do our best." Ozu has the son, as he cries, keep his back to the camera to avoid sentimentality, but that the son stands crying with his face to the wall, a posture he will once again assume later in the film when his father dies, only increases the pathos of the scene. "A man shouldn't cry," the father repeats. All Japanese, sons as well as fathers, may be called upon to make great sacrifices; it is for a good that they may understand only much later, and before which personal inclination must always give way. Although the subject is different, the import of these words bears directly upon the service of young Japanese in the war.

Although he resumes living with his parent only during the last week of the father's life, the separation has not prevented the son from growing up to be a strong, effective human being. For all along he has been guided by the advice of his father: "Once you choose a road, you must go as far ahead on it as possible." As the father spoke these words, on the wall behind him was a banner with the character for "morality." To Ozu, it represents the man.

The most important scene of *There Was a Father* takes place at a hot

springs resort where father and son are able to meet briefly. The son announces his desire to leave his job at Akita in northern Japan in order to move to Tokyo where he can at last be united with his beloved father. The pain of living apart has proven unbearable. But the father opposes this plan. He talks about the son's job (he, too, is a teacher) as a "mission," his vocabulary coming close indeed to equating duty with support of the war. He lectures his son that there is no room in life for "personal sentiment," and, in another reference that applies as well to those participating in the war, "you can be at your best only when the task is difficult."

The father talks of the son's responsibility to his students at the school in Akita as a lifelong effort, instructing the Japanese audience that they will be happiest pursuing their duty. Father and son then go fishing again, casting identically as before, in a shot now expressing the harmony that will ensue once the father's advice is taken. And the next morning the father explicitly reiterates what his sermonizing has really been about: "A man has to serve his country."

There are two actual references to the war. The brother of one of the son's pupils has been drafted and the son tells him to study hard since his parents must be finding it difficult to manage without his drafted brother. Later we hear that the son has passed his "conscription test," although this is presented as a testament to his manliness and does not specifically indicate that he is destined for the front. Rather, Ozu suggests that his passing this test makes possible his marriage at the end to Fumiko, the daughter of one of his father's friends.

Ozu thus accomplishes his propaganda for the war through appeals to a traditional style of obedience, which is, however, only a brief step away from enlisting that obedience in the service of the State. The reference to the son's passing the "conscription test" suggests that, like all young men, he may indeed be drafted. What is important to Ozu is not that he may soon have to fight but that he be morally prepared, should the moment arrive. And it seems that, at least in part, Ozu made this film so that Japanese youths might be so readied.

Duty and ceremony replace individual and egotistic cravings in the young man who grows properly to maturity. The son, visiting the father in Tokyo at last, immediately rolls down his shirtsleeves, puts on his jacket, and offers incense before the funeral tablet of his mother. At this point the father says: "You've turned into a fine son." The dutiful person is the good one; those who live by their duty are rewarded with what is most valuable in life—the respect of others. To demonstrate this point Ozu shows that the father is still loved by his former students, who have never forgotten him. His life has been enhanced, not diminished, by his having chosen a higher duty in sacrificing his profession. All the former students marry, as will the son by the end of the film. All, as they were advised by the father, struggle to go as far in life as they possibly can. Conforming to established values is best. If the father could live to see it, he says,

what would please him most is his son's having "a fine wife and nice children."

The typical Ozu clothesline blows in the wind, a portent of time and change. Unexpectedly and prematurely, although not surprisingly—given the hard life he has led—the father suffers a heart attack. Unaware of its seriousness, he says that he does not wish to indulge himself. He will go to work as always; he has never taken a day off!

But he can't get up. Wracked by horrible pain and convulsions, he cannot go on. Only such a trauma puts an end to the fulfillment of his duty. A lyrical shot of the garden where the attack occurred, a symbol of the moral quietude of their lives which no vicissitude can diminish, is followed by a cut to the hospital where the son and the father's former students wait for news.

The father's last words are in keeping with his character. Again he tells his son to "work hard" and not "be sad," since this would be only futile and debilitating. He says, "I did everything I could," which, as the film has amply shown, is true. The son, with Ozu's approval, turns away and cries, just as he did as a small boy when his father told him he was moving to Tokyo. Tears at such times are not unmanly but truly appropriate. Ozu's men thus sometimes partake of the Heian ideal of manhood, as exemplified by the emotional Prince Genji, rather than of the more severe samurai ethic of self-restraint. The father's friend, Hirata, is there to reiterate the propagandistic motif that consistently runs through this film. He asserts that the father was able to die so peacefully because he had accomplished his purpose in life.

Like *Tokyo Story*, *There Was a Father* ends not on the theme of death but on one of consolation. This is appropriate because the values and the traditions of the *kokutai*, on behalf of which the father has lived, survive him. His life has had meaning because he has contributed to keeping alive what it means to be a Japanese. He has produced a son "lucky to have such a fine father to remember," who will himself, now married to Fumiko, try to become such a man.

On the train returning to the village where the father was born, as if the son were a reincarnation of the patriarch, he remembers with pathos how, as a boy, he had so looked forward to seeing his father. The last week is one he will treasure as the happiest of his life. Like that of *Tank Commander Nishizumi*, despite the death of the hero, the ending of *There Was a Father* is not sentimental. However extreme the son's feelings on behalf of "such a nice father," they could not possibly be excessive. The train moves into the darkness, like the life of a person rushing to its end. With Fumiko, the son sits amidst his very good memories. By these he is sustained and made happy. His father's example has taught him to be something larger than himself.

Of Kurosawa's films, *Sanshiro Sugata*, *The Most Beautiful* and *Men Who Tread on the Tiger's Tail* were made during the war. The last-named was banned by the censors and only *The Most Beautiful*, a propa-