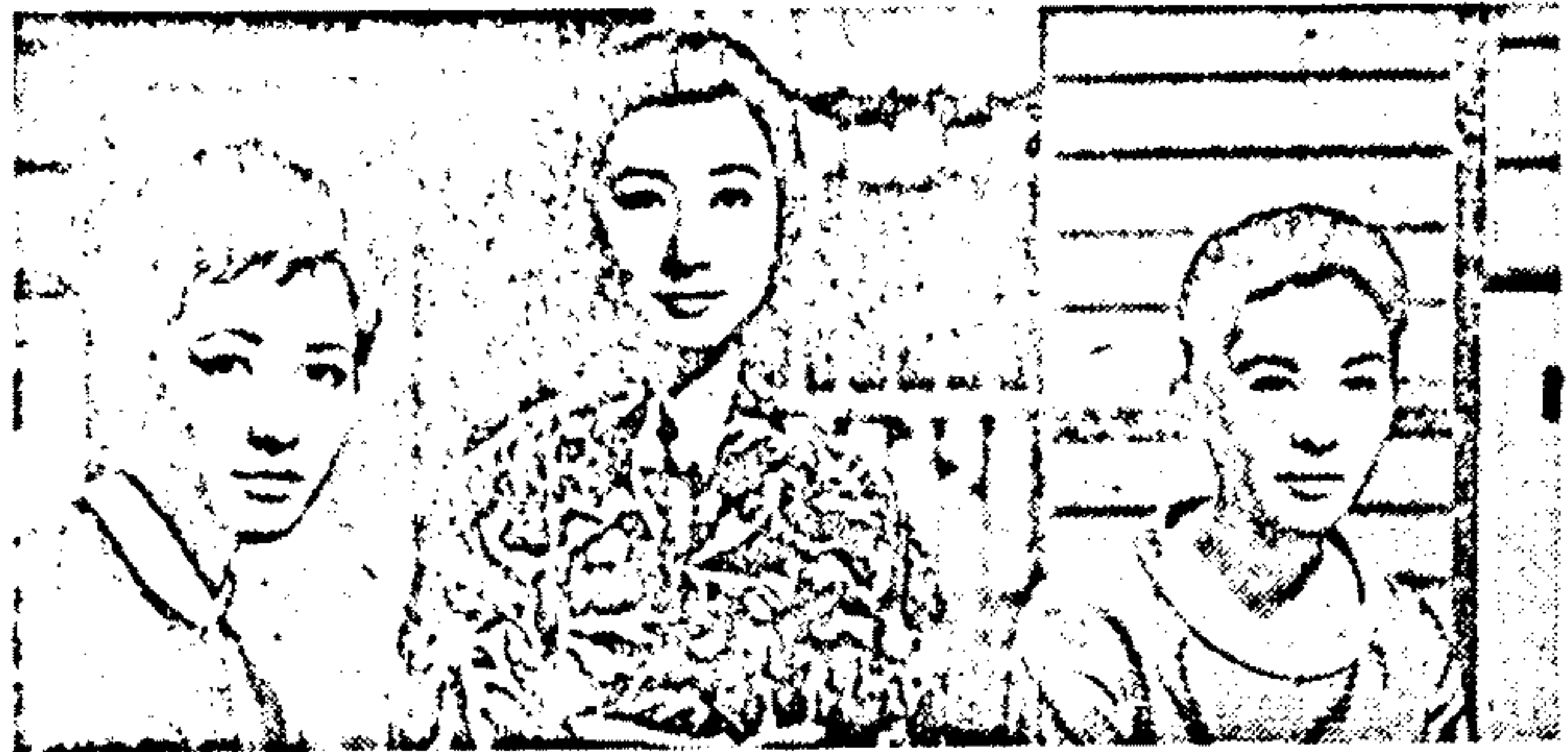


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*Equinox Flower*

## Funny OZU

Daryl Chin

*Equinox Flower*  
Cinema Studio

Of all the "masters" of the cinema, the late Yasujiro Ozu remains one of the most controversial. Since the release of his films to the West beginning in 1971 (almost a decade after his death), the only thing that's happened has been further obfuscations of the issue: the issue, in the broadest sense, is the status of film as an art. In the other arts, there are established canons of taste: few serious theater critics would doubt Shakespeare's artistry, few serious musicologists would dispute the importance of Beethoven, few serious art historians would deny Rembrandt's status. But in the cinema, it's pot luck, and most critics are barbarous enough to take a shot. Even Carl Theodor Dreyer was not exempt from the petty derision of faddish tastes: in the case of Yasu-

jiro Ozu, there exist so many complications that an equitable view of his achievements may be well-nigh impossible.

One problem with the gradual introduction of Ozu's works has been a disproportionate emphasis: most of the films that have been released here have been "late" films. In terms of the *politique des auteurs*, it's analogous to judging Frank Capra and Leo McCarey on the basis of the films they made after 1950, or Frank Borzage on the basis of the films he made from 1941 until his death. One would wonder what the fuss was about.

In the case of Ozu, this disproportion has two immediate disadvantages. The first is that it should be remembered that Ozu's critical reputation in Japan was *not* based on the post-World War II films, but on those films (with two exceptions) made before the end of World War II. (The exceptions are the 1949 *Late Spring* and the 1951 *Early Summer*.) The second is that one aspect of Ozu's modernism is that his films should not be seen as individual works, but as parts of one continuing lifework in which each section refines, redefines, discerns the set of another section. *Tokyo Story* (1952), the Ozu film with perhaps the greatest currency in this country, has been handicapped by this; of the four films in what can be considered a tetralogy (*Late Spring*, *Early Summer*, *Tokyo Story*, and the 1957 *Tokyo Twilight*), *Tokyo Story* is the most obviously distinguished, and it is, for that reason, a little more obvious, a little more strained, a little more affected.

*Equinox Flower*, Ozu's first color film which is only now receiving full commercial release, was made in 1958. It was made right after *Tokyo Twilight*, which stands as the summation of much of Ozu's concerns. Having made one of his most intense, certainly his bleakest, his most despairing, his most bitter film (*Tokyo*

*Twilight*), Ozu embarked on a series of comedies (the field he had excelled in as a young film director). *Equinox Flower*, an incisively witty and charming work, would inaugurate this final phase of Ozu's career.

As if to signal the change in his career, Ozu decided to work in color; he would continue to do so until his death. In that his career can be divided according to certain technical developments, Ozu's career can be compared to that of Jean Renoir. Just as color seems to have acted as a medium to broader strokes but gentler outlines in Renoir's canvas, so color seemed to have been the means to a mellower, more comical, mellifluous end for Ozu.

*Equinox Flower* is, formally, a very beautiful film. The colors are delicately orchestrated so that, at times, the images are like a succession of still-lives. But what makes *Equinox Flower* decisively a major work in Ozu's career are the variations it runs on the schema established in the post-war tetralogy.

A few words on these four films. All four films are about the disruption of a family unit, connected to the problems in the status of a daughter-figure (played in all four films by Setsuko Hara). In the last film, *Tokyo Twilight*, Hara plays a woman who has left her husband; she and her baby daughter are living with her father. The husband is an alcoholic, failed intellectual who has taken to wife-beating and child-beating to relieve his frustrations; at the end, Hara returns to her husband in order to observe the traditional protocol that a wife should be with her husband. Her father had been urging her to return, because of his beliefs in traditional values. It is these values which made his wife leave, destroyed his younger daughter, and returned his older daughter to her (horrendous) husband.

In *Equinox Flower*, the problem of status is again played out in terms of marriage. A man (played by Shin Saburi) and his wife (played by Kinuyo Tanaka) have two daughters. The man has counselled a friend to accept the changing times, i.e., accept the fact that women do not need arranged marriages. When his older daughter (played by Ineko Arima) decides to get married to the man of her own choice, the man is shocked. Trying to get him to accept the wedding, his wife, his younger daughter, friends of his older daughter and his own friends remind him, "you're inconsistent!" (This phrase becomes a formal round: it's rather like the variations on "you're wrong, Dunson" which get said to John Wayne all through *Red River*.) The man attends his daughter's wedding, but not with the best humor. A few

weeks later, after much talking with his wife and his friends, he accepts his daughter's choice: he visits his daughter's new home.

What's always surprising about Ozu's films is the way a simple story can seem so suggestive. Subtle details accumulate to give shading and texture to the entire picture. In his comedies, Ozu's details can be cunningly repetitive and surprisingly ribald, the repetitions of "you're inconsistent" begin to sound like a broken record; one outrageous running gag involves the wife. Every time a gossip friend comes to talk, the wife excuses herself, and when she returns, she demurely explains that she had to go to the bathroom because she knows it's going to be a long talk.

In this film, as in *Early Summer*, the daughter has her own way; however, unlike the Setsuko Hara tetralogy, *Equinox Flower* is an optimistic film. The family unit, in this film, is not dissolved. The family is, in fact, reconciled. The marriage, though momentarily disruptive, becomes a process of maturation for the entire family. The mother, by siding with her daughter, very quietly announces her right to her own opinions; the younger daughter announces her decision to independence; the father realizes the right of his family to autonomy; the older daughter has made up her own mind, and has made her own life. The reason *Equinox Flower* is such a buoyantly comic film is that such problems are resolved rather than dissolved.

At the end of the film, Shin Saburi is riding on the train as he goes to visit his daughter. He looks out the window. The train then is shown from the back, moving into the horizon at dusk. This scene is, as often with Ozu's endings, indescribably touching. A myriad of meanings seem to be called forth: as with John Ford, Ozu had the ability to create image patterns that set off reverberations. The movement of the train into the expanse of the horizon resembles those diagonal marches that appear in Ford's films; somehow a sense of history is evoked.

In these late comedies, Ozu returns to the vein of domestic humor which distinguished his early career. For all the recent reevaluation of Ozu that's been going on, it should be noted that, certainly in his early and his late works, Ozu is a damned funny entertainer. His films, always impeccably acted, beautifully designed, elegantly crafted, are also the kind that you can laugh out loud at. If the work from his great middle period is frequently sad, often depressing, at times sombre, his late comedies have a boisterousness that can tip over into the bawdy. For all its formal, thematic, stylistic qualities, *Equinox Flower* has a professional snap that one finds in few comedies nowadays.