

A Maid in the U.S. House: Architecture, Occupied Japan, and Tokyo Joe

Nominerdene Enkhbayar, University of Tsukuba, Japan

The Asian Conference on Cultural Studies 2021
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This paper aims to shed light on the hitherto understudied relations between Japanese women and architecture in the post-war Hollywood film *Tokyo Joe* (1949), starring Humphrey Bogart. Set in Japan during the post-war U.S. military occupation, the film features a well-equipped example of dependents housing designated as a “U.S. House” and a nursemaid who works there. In historical actuality, U.S. Houses were upper-class residences requisitioned from Japanese owners for Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP) officials’ residences and were looked after by a retinue of Japanese kimono-clad maids whose salaries were paid for by the Japanese government. In *Tokyo Joe*, SCAP lawyer Mark Landis, his wife, Trina, and a daughter, Anya, live in one of those U.S. Houses. What this paper seeks to examine is not the nuclear family at the center of the U.S. House, but a Japanese nursemaid, a seemingly marginal and dependent character. Specifically, I focus on Nani-San, a sympathetic nanny turned villain who works for the Landises in order to spy and kidnap their child. As I demonstrate it, Nani-San is a mediator who connects the U.S. House and its exterior world that is occupied Japan, thereby propelling the narrative forward. By situating *Tokyo Joe* at the juncture of two converging histories, the cultural history of architecture and the social history of dependent Japanese women, this paper examines the imbricated relationship of the nursemaid and the U.S. House in occupied Japan and argues that this relationship significantly complicates the narrative of *Tokyo Joe*.

Keywords: Film Studies, Occupied Japan, Architecture, Japanese Women

iafor

The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

This paper aims to shed light on the hitherto understudied relations between Japanese women and architecture in the post-war Hollywood film *Tokyo Joe* (1949), starring Humphrey Bogart. Set in Japan during the post-war U.S. military occupation, together with backdrop shots of streets of post-war Tokyo, the film features a well-equipped example of dependents housing (DH) designated as a “U.S. House” and a nursemaid who works there. In historical actuality, U.S. Houses were upper-class residences requisitioned from Japanese owners for Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP) officials’ residences and were looked after by a retinue of Japanese kimono-clad maids whose salaries were paid for by the Japanese government. The SCAP officials and their families lived in U.S. Houses. In *Tokyo Joe*, SCAP lawyer Mark Landis, his wife, Trina, and a daughter, Anya, live in one of those U.S. Houses surrounded by Japanese servants and maids.

What this paper seeks to examine is not the nuclear family—the Landises—at the center of the U.S. House, but a Japanese nursemaid, an ostensibly marginal and dependent character. Specifically, I focus on Nani-San, a seemingly sympathetic nanny turned villain who works for the Landises to spy on them and kidnap their child. As I discuss below, she is a mediator who connects the U.S. House and its exterior world that is occupied Japan, thereby propelling the narrative forward.

By situating *Tokyo Joe* at the juncture of two converging histories, the cultural history of architecture and the social history of dependent Japanese women, this paper examines the imbricated relationship of the nursemaid and the U.S. House in occupied Japan and argues that this relationship significantly complicates the narrative of *Tokyo Joe*.

Occupied Japan and *Tokyo Joe*

Set in Japan during the post-war U.S. occupation, *Tokyo Joe* differs from most other productions about the far east because it includes first-hand footage of occupied Japan (“Tokyo Joe,” n.d.).¹ In this film, Humphrey Bogart plays Joe Barrett, an ex-Air Corps, who returns to Tokyo and the life he walked out on before the war, believing that his White Russian wife, Trina, had died in a Japanese concentration camp. The story of Joe and his former wife, Trina, unfolds against the backdrop shots of life in post-war Tokyo—shots that give the film both an authentic and exotic touch.

Newspapers at that time, as well as the film’s producer, commented on *Tokyo Joe*’s originality and unfamiliar feel to Western audiences by highlighting its raw footage. *The Goulburn Evening Post* reported that the “most interesting thing about this drama is some excellent background shots of life in post-war Tokyo” (Ritz, 1950), and *Variety* noted, “This authentic touch serves as an excellent background for the unfolding of the plot’s meller elements” (Variety Staff, 1948). Moreover, one article in *Shin-eiga*² sounded a positive note saying how the footage would enable the film to show the world “true Japan” (“Tokyo Joe to wa donna eiga ka?” 1949). Robert Lord, the producer who shot the on-site footage in Tokyo said, “The background will be fascinating to people who have never been here. The kids will interest American audiences as much as they did me” (Falk, 1949).

¹ Robert Lord shot the footage with the help of the occupation army in Japan, and this was the first time after World War II that an American company was allowed to film in Japan.

² *Shin-eiga* (New Film) was a Japanese magazine which focused on films, published by Shin-eiga-sha.

U.S. House and Architecture

One significant, though often neglected element, of the background in *Tokyo Joe* is the architecture. The film, for instance, features a traditional Japanese-style house with tatami rooms, and a Japanese garden, which is the residence of Baron Kimura, the chief villain in the story. Kimura's mansion houses several of his servants, while interiors such as traditionally painted Japanese sliding doors and hanging scrolls emphasize the architecture's exoticness and character difference between Joe and Kimura.

Tokyo Joe features not only traditional architecture like Kimura's mansion, but also the "U.S. House," a unique architecture that was distinctive to occupied Japan. After World War II, in Japan, the U.S. Army implemented the construction of DH for the occupation army forces in Japan (Koizumi, Takayabu, & Uchida, 1999a, 1999b; Akio, 2011). Dependents housing is a family residence for occupation military personnel stationed in Japan after the war. Western-style houses that survived wartime bombing were also requisitioned to be used as army officers' family houses (Koizumi, Takayabu, & Uchida, 1999a, p. 57). In *Tokyo Joe*, we can see similar architecture depicted as the "U.S. House," and it is in this house that we first see Nani-San, the seemingly sympathetic nursemaid.

Contrary to the traditional style of Kimura's house, the interior of the U.S. House is Western in its aesthetics. After finding out his wife is alive, Joe goes to the Landises' house, a Western-style two-story mansion with a garage and a nameplate that says, "MARK LANDIS U.S. HOUSE 714." The house has a spacious entrance, and at the end of the entrance, we can see a large staircase, characteristic of a modern Western house. Next to the entrance is a big spacious living room decorated with glass windows, a coffee table, a fireplace, and a grand piano at the center. A maid and a gardener, both Japanese, are seen to be taking care of the house. The geisha dolls and bonsais on the fireplace and the Japanese-style paper sliding doors give the interior a Japanese touch. Upon entering the house, Joe finds out Trina has divorced him and is now married to Mark Landis, an American SCAP lawyer, and there is also a girl, Anya, Joe's daughter.

In the film, the U.S. House is home to the Landises, a nuclear family of Mark, Trina, and Anya, which displaces the original nuclear family of Joe, Trina, and Anya. Joe, the biological father, is replaced by Mark. This displacement of a family member is the result of Trina's remarriage to Mark. During the occupation era, DH and the U.S. House became home to American nuclear families like the Landises. Requisitioned houses were rarely used as DH in the state that they were found; most of them underwent some kind of renovation work. The goal of the renovation was to add *openness* to the interior, which was more characteristic of modern American houses than Japanese homes (Koizumi, Takayabu, & Uchida, 1999a, p. 58). Furthermore, DH usually had modern electric home appliances such as electric stoves, refrigerators, vacuum cleaners, and washing machines (Koizumi, 2012, p. 134). A lot of American families enjoyed a lavish material lifestyle that would not necessarily have been available in their hometowns, let alone having maids similar to Nani-San.

Nani-San as a Mediator

Although Nani-San is not part of the nuclear family, as she is a maid working in the U.S. House, her character has a deeper connection to the architecture than it initially appears. During the occupation, DH was important not only for American families but also for Japanese women who worked there as maids. In a way, their livelihood was dependent on the salaries they made

from working in DH. Maids for American families were a new type of job created in the wake of the construction of DH (Koizumi, 2012, p. 126). Although working in DH was a relatively high-paid job and may have been a desirable job to impoverished Japanese women who had a longing for American culture and wanted to learn English, DH was also a site of racial and class struggle (Koizumi, 2012, p. 142).³ In the film *Tokyo Joe*, the U.S. House should not only be read simply as a privileged space but also as a site/space where Japanese women's tension-ridden stories unfold.

The story of Nani-San, a putatively marginal Japanese nursemaid character, unfolds in and out of the U.S. House, the residence of the Landis family, complicating the main plot of *Tokyo Joe*. She is the only maid in the narrative who is given a name, and she is the sole Japanese female character to function as a mediator.

Nani-San is a mediator in the sense that she is a meaning-maker, rather than a meaning-carrier in the narrative of *Tokyo Joe*. According to Bruno Latour, mediators are defined by their unexpectedness (Latour, 2005, p. 39). Trina initially introduces Nani-San as Anya's nanny, but as the story progresses, contrary to her initial image as a sympathetic nanny, her identity is revealed as a double agent working for Baron Kimura while disguising herself as a maid in the U.S. House. Through her, we can see the dualism of the U.S. house—a house requisitioned from a Japanese owner by the U.S. occupation forces—which informs and is informed by Nani-San's double identity as a nanny and a spy, working at the same time for the Japanese baron and the American SCAP lawyer.

The imbricated relation of the nursemaid and the U.S. House is the prime subplot that complicates and subverts the narrative of *Tokyo Joe* simultaneously. The U.S. House is a haven for Trina and her daughter, Anya, and it is also the only place where the protagonist Joe gets a chance to rekindle his marriage to Trina and strengthen his family bond with Anya. However, with Nani-San's double identity as a spy, her existence opens the door for Kimura to take a course of action against Joe. With Nani-San's cooperation, Kimura's scheme penetrates the walls of the U.S. House, transforming the house into a vulnerable site for both Joe and his family. Being in close contact with both the U.S. House and Kimura's mansion, Nani-San propels the narrative forward by pushing Joe and his family into the next great danger, which is the kidnapping of Joe's biological daughter, Anya.

One major turning point in the narrative is this abduction. By order of Kimura, being the mother-like figure to the child, Nani-San initiates the kidnapping. In the scene where the kidnapping happens, Kimura's men ambush Anya and Nani-San during their walk outside. Nani-San quickly reassures the bewildered child by introducing Kimura's underlings as her friends. This sequence is important in the film because it prevents the narrative from halting and compels it to move forward. Before this scene, the film's story was destined to end when Joe agreed to cooperate with the occupation forces to arrest Kimura. However, the kidnapping triggers Joe to confront Kimura and save his daughter all by himself, which ultimately leads to the reconciliation of the protagonist and his ex-wife, Trina.

³ Kazuko Koizumi pointed out how Japanese maids were victims of sexual violence at the hands of male employers. This situation was caused by the power relationship between the employer and the maid, and disparity in social position. By highlighting the maid's sexuality, Japanese magazines at that time criticized maids for having a relationship with American soldiers.

Conclusion

As I have discussed, in *Tokyo Joe*, the U.S. House functions not only as a background for the displaced American nuclear family, the Landises, but also as a site/space where the stories of occupiers and occupied, inflected by race, gender, and class, in post-war Japan are negotiated, creating complex subplots. In the film, the architecture itself emerges as a site for Japan and America's negotiations of power. In the end, *Tokyo Joe* significantly affords an insight into the importance of architecture in cinematic space.

References

- Akio, S. (2011). *Washington haitsu: Jieichikyū ga Tokyo ni kizanda sengo* [Washington heights: Dependents housing area]. Tokyo: Shinchosha.
- Falk, R. (1949, January 30). Tokyo backgrounds. *The New York Times*, X4.
- Koizumi, K., Takayabu, A., & Uchida, S. (1999a). *Nihon no seikatsu sutairu no genten to natta dependento hausu* [Dependents housing: The origin of Japanese lifestyle]. Tokyo: Sumai no Toshokan Shuppanyoku.
- Koizumi, K., Takayabu, A., & Uchida, S. (1999b). *Dependento hausu ga nokoshita kenchiku kagu juki* [What dependents housing left: Architecture, furniture, and fixtures]. Tokyo: Sumai no Toshokan Shuppanyoku.
- Koizumi, K. (2012). *Jochū ga ita showa* [Showa where there were maids]. Tokyo: Kawade Shobō Shinsha.
- Latour, B. (2005). *Reassembling the social: An introduction to actor-network theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lord, R. (Producer), & Heisler, S. (Director). (1949). *Tokyo Joe* [Motion picture]. United States: Columbia Pictures.
- Ritz, H. (1950, August 7). Tokyo Joe. *The Goulburn Evening Post*, p. 8.
- Tokyo Joe. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.tcm.com/tcmdb/title/16018/tokyo-joe#notes>
- Tokyo Joe to wa donna eiga ka? [What kind of movie is Tokyo Joe?]. (1949, February). *Shin-eiga*, 6(2), 24–25.
- Variety Staff. (1948, December). Tokyo Joe. *Variety*. Retrieved June 12, 2021, from <https://variety.com/1948/film/reviews/tokyo-joe-1200416088/>

Contact email: nr_2411@yahoo.com