

# Japan's Postwar Youth and the Residue of Imperialism

## —The Representation of the Crown Prince in *Kodoku no hito* (1957)—

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In the late 1950s, Nikkatsu, one of the leading film production studios during the prosperous era of Japanese cinema, rose to prominence in the realm of youth films, thanks to the commercial success of *Season of the Sun* (*Taiyō no kisetsu*, dir. Furukawa Takumi, 1956). This film, which audaciously depicts the nihilism of postwar youth and their exploration of sexuality, was enthusiastically received by contemporary young audiences. It effectively symbolized Japan's postwar modernization and the rebellious nature of the younger generation against the previous ones who had matured during the time of the Japanese Empire. The film spurred a wealth of youth films; one notable example is *Kodoku no hito* [*The Solitary One*] (dir. Nishikawa Katsumi, 1957), an adaptation of a novel written by a former schoolmate of the then-Crown Prince Akihito. The narrative revolves around the clash between the students and the inflexible restrictions imposed by the Imperial Household Agency. The young protagonists, yearning to treat the Crown Prince as their equal classmate, find themselves at odds with the traditional authorities. At first glance, the film might seem to portray the Crown Prince as a prisoner of outdated traditions, stripped of personal freedom. Nevertheless, when examining its cinematography, we find that the film sustains reverence for the Imperial family as unrepresentable divine figures. This is accomplished by avoiding any direct representation of the Crown Prince's face. Despite his central role in the narrative, the audience only catch glimpses of his back or gloved hands in most scenes. This reverence persisted among the Japanese public, even after Emperor Hirohito publicly renounced his divine status following the Pacific War. This article aims to explore the film's unique portrayal of the Crown Prince and situate it within the historical background of Japan's postwar modernization.

**Keywords:** Japanese cinema; the Crown Prince; the Imperial family; representation; Nikkatsu; literary adaptation.

### Introduction

In Japan, the cinematic representation of the Emperor and the Imperial family has been a complicated issue. As the country abandoned its feudal social structure and became a modern nation at the beginning of the Meiji period, the government re-established Shintoism as the national religion and used the divine authority of the Emperor to rule over and mobilize people. In *Nihongi: Chronicles of Japan from the Earliest Times to A.D. 697*, a classical text which recounts the creation myth of Japan, Jimmu, the legendary first Emperor of Japan, is described as the founder of the nation and a direct descendant of the sun-goddess, Amaterasu.<sup>1</sup> With their supposed direct lineage

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<sup>1</sup> *Nihongi: Chronicles of Japan from the Earliest Times to A.D. 697*, vol. 1, translated by William George Aston (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1897), pp. 109-137.

from Emperor Jimmu, the Imperial family was revered as gods in human form even in modern times. During World War II, it was considered virtuous for Japanese subjects to sacrifice their lives for Emperor Hirohito. Thus, subsequent to the war, it was critically important for the Allied Powers to demystify the Emperor. In September 1945, the General Headquarters of the Allied Powers (known as GHQ) had a photograph taken of Supreme Commander Douglas MacArthur with Emperor Hirohito and released it to Japan's national newspapers.<sup>2</sup> As a military leader and a representative of the victorious Allies, MacArthur's position in the photograph, in which he dwarfs the Japanese Emperor standing next to him, symbolically illustrates both the dominance of the United States in the post-war world and Japan's defeat in the war. Furthermore, on the New Year's Day the following year, Hirohito was advised by the GHQ to make an address which is commonly called the Humanity Declaration. In this address, the Emperor denied his divinity and proclaimed that his relationship with Japanese people is based on mutual trust and affection, not on legends or myths.<sup>3</sup>

Despite this official denial of the Emperor's divinity, there have been strong reservations among Japan's major film studios and TV networks about portraying the Emperor in their fiction works. As film critic Yomota Inuhiko notes, in war films, the filmmakers ensured that the face of the actor playing as Hirohito is not shown directly on the screen.<sup>4</sup> Yomota argues that it was not until Russian filmmaker Aleksandr Sokurov's *The Sun* (2005) that Hirohito was portrayed as a demythologized human being, played by the actor and comedian Issey Ogata.<sup>5</sup> This was not necessarily the case with the previous Emperors. *Emperor Meiji and the Great Russo-Japanese War*, the 1957 film directed by Watanabe Kunio, starred Arashi Kanjuro as the titular Emperor of Meiji and met with a great commercial success.<sup>6</sup> Arashi was recognized as the first actor to play as a modern Emperor in Japanese cinema.<sup>7</sup> The actor was initially hesitant to play the role, believing that his on-screen portrayal would constitute defamation against the dignity of the Emperor.<sup>8</sup> Until the war time, the representation of the Emperor had been censored by the government, and the defamation that Arashi mentioned would have faced criminal charges.<sup>9</sup> Even after Hirohito's Humanity Declaration, however, the mysticism of the Imperial lineage was not completely eradicated from the psyche of the Japanese public.

This article will approach the question of the Imperial representation through analysis of *Kodoku no hito* [*The Solitary One*] (dir. Nishikawa Katsumi, 1957). The film is based on the novel of the same title written by a former schoolmate of the then-Crown Prince Akihito. The narrative revolves around the tension between the students and the inflexible restrictions imposed by the Imperial Household Agency. The young protagonists, yearning to treat the Crown Prince as their equal classmate, find themselves clashing with traditional authorities. At first glance, the film appears to portray the Crown Prince as a victim of outdated traditions, stripped of personal freedom. However, a closer look at the film's cinematography reveals that the film sustains reverence for the Imperial family, portrayed as unrepresentable divine figures. Notably, this is accomplished by avoiding any direct representation of the Crown

<sup>2</sup> "Tennō heika Makkāsā gensui go-hōmon" (天皇陛下 マツカーサー元帥御訪問) [His Majesty the Emperor Visits General MacArthur], *Yomiuri Hōchi*, September 29, 1945, p. 1; "Tennō heika, Makkwāsā gensui go-hōmon" (天皇陛下、マツクアサー元帥御訪問) [His Majesty the Emperor Visits General MacArthur], *Asahi Shimbun*, September 29, 1945, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> [Emperor Hirohito], "Shōsho" (詔書) [Imperial rescript], in *Kampō gōgai: Shōwa nijū-ichi nen ichi gatsu tsuitachi* (官報號外 昭和二十一年一月一日) [Official Gazette, Extra Edition: January 1, 1946] (Tokyo: Printing Bureau of the Ministry of Finance, 1946), n.p.

<sup>4</sup> Yomota Inuhiko, *Nihon eiga to sengo no shinwa* (日本映画と戦後の神話) [Japanese Cinema and the Myth of the Postwar Period] (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten), 2007, p. 46.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>6</sup> Iwamoto Kenji, "Meiji tennō to Nichi-Ro dai-sensō: Ōkura Mitsugu no 'tennō eiga' ni miru kaikyū to fukko" (『明治天皇と日露大戦争』——大蔵貢の「天皇映画」に見る懐旧と復古) [*Emperor Meiji and the Great Russo-Japanese War: Nostalgia and Restoration in Ōkura Mitsugu's "Emperor Film"*], in *Eiga no naka no tennō: Kindan no shōzō* (映画のなかの天皇——禁断の肖像) [The Emperors on Film: The Forbidden Portrait], ed. Iwamoto Kenji (Tokyo: Shinwa-sha, 2007), p. 171-172.

<sup>7</sup> Kodama Ryūichi, "Tennō wo enjiru kabuki yakusha" (天皇を演じる歌舞伎役者) [Kabuki Actors Playing as the Emperors], in *Eiga no naka no tennō: Kindan no shōzō* (映画のなかの天皇——禁断の肖像) [The Emperors on Film: The Forbidden Portrait], ed. Iwamoto Kenji (Tokyo: Shinwa-sha, 2007), p. 203.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Iwamoto Kenji, "Fuzai to sūhai no hazama de: Senzen Nihon eiga no tennō-zō" (不在と崇拜のはざま——戦前日本映画の天皇像) [Between Absence and Worship: The Image of the Emperor in Prewar Japanese Cinema], in *Eiga no naka no tennō: Kindan no shōzō* (映画のなかの天皇——禁断の肖像) [The Emperors on Film: The Forbidden Portrait], ed. Iwamoto Kenji (Tokyo: Shinwa-sha, 2007), pp. 12-15.

Prince's face. Despite his central role in the narrative, the audience only catch glimpses of his back or gloved hands in most scenes. This sense of reverence remained strong among the Japanese public, even after Emperor Hirohito publicly renounced his divine status. This article aims to explore the film's distinctive representation of the Crown Prince and situate it within the historical context of Japan's postwar modernization.

### 1. The Crown Prince Akihito and *Kodoku no hito*

Hirohito's first son, the Crown Prince Akihito, who currently holds the title Emperor Emeritus, was hugely popular among the Japanese public in the 1950s and was recognized as the face of a new Japan. When he was nineteen years old, the government sent him to the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953. The Japanese government's diplomatic strategy to highlight Japan's postwar reform was evident, as seen in British Pathé's newsreel *Prince Akihito Arrives* (1953). Since international communities still regarded Japan as a former axis of evil, a visit by Hirohito himself was unthinkable. Although Akihito was only a child at the time of the war, the narrator of the newsreel notes that even his visit to the U.K. provoked demonstrations by war veterans. By introducing the English-speaking young prince to the outside world, however, the Japanese government emphasized that postwar Japan has become a new country, distinct from the previous Empire, a country that can "speak the same language" with the former Allied Powers. Arguably, Akihito's visit can be seen as the use of an Imperial family member as "the symbol of the State and of the unity of the People,"<sup>10</sup> the postwar definition of the Emperor as stipulated by the new Constitution of Japan. Even though Akihito was yet to become an Emperor, the Imperial symbolism was employed strategically to improve Japan's tarnished reputation.

*Kodoku no hito* is a youth film about the school life of Akihito at Gakushuin High School. Its production company, Nikkatsu, was known for its youth films in the 1950s, and this film can be seen as being line with the studio's hallmark genre, which symbolized Japan's postwar modernization and the rebellious nature of the younger generation against the previous ones who had matured during the time of the Japanese Empire. As Aaron Gerow describes, "This is a youth film that not only defines youth, but also justifies the youth film genre and its vision of life, through negation. Youth is specifically what the Crown Prince cannot experience."<sup>11</sup> The narrative revolves around the clash between the schoolmates of Akihito and the rigid restrictions imposed on the prince by the Imperial Household Agency. The young protagonists, yearning to treat the Crown Prince as their equal classmate, find themselves at odds with the traditional authorities. In this sense, the film portrays the Crown Prince as a victim of outdated traditions, stripped of personal freedom. In the narrative, the Crown Prince is the Solitary One, who is resigned about his inability to enjoy his youth and passively submits to the confines of the Imperial Household Agency.

However, in terms of the visual representation of the Crown Prince, the film contributes to the mystification of the Imperial family. The film's distinctive avoidance of the direct representation of the Crown Prince can be seen in the film's theatrical poster (Fig. 1). Here, the Crown Prince is depicted as one of the four high school students seen on the left side, the one who is showing only his back toward the viewer. The white gloves that he holds in his left hand is the only indication that the character, though dressed in the same school uniform as those of his classmates, is a noble figure.

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<sup>10</sup> "The Constitution of Japan," Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, November 3, 1946, [https://japan.kantei.go.jp/constitution\\_and\\_government\\_of\\_japan/constitution\\_e.html#:~:text=The%20Emperor%20shall%20be%20the,Law%20passed%20by%20the%20Diet](https://japan.kantei.go.jp/constitution_and_government_of_japan/constitution_e.html#:~:text=The%20Emperor%20shall%20be%20the,Law%20passed%20by%20the%20Diet).

<sup>11</sup> Aaron Gerow, "The Nichigeki Film Festival: Cinema, the Emperor, and *The Solitary One*," Tangemania: Aaron Gerow's Japanese Film Page, January 2, 2018, <http://www.aarongerow.com/news/the-nichigeki-film-festival.html>.



Fig. 1. Theatrical poster of *Kodoku no hito*.

In the film, too, the depiction of the Crown Prince's face is consistently avoided. The Prince is played by Kurosawa Mitsuo, who had no acting background and was cast for the part of the Crown Prince solely because of his resemblance to Akihito.<sup>12</sup> However, his face is never shown in the film. Frequently, metonymy is employed to indicate the Crown Prince's presence. In Figure 2, the Crown Prince's gloves substitute the direct presentation of his entire figure. At other instances, his face is deliberately obscured by various objects, such as the camera in Figure 3. Moreover, point-of-view shots are used to provide the audience with a perspective of what the Crown Prince observes, rather than presenting his image on screen.



Fig. 2 and 3. The Crown Prince's gloves (left) and his face blocked by the camera (right).

Another notable scene depicts the Crown Prince commuting to school in his chauffeured car, while his fellow students are walking on foot. The Imperial secretary tells him, "Your Highness, that's Kyōgoku,"<sup>13</sup> prompting the Crown Prince to see one of his schoolmates on the street (Fig. 4). As a point-of-view shot, the shot of the Crown Prince waving his hand at Kyōgoku is technically awkward, with his left hand entering the frame from the left side (Fig. 5). However, Kyōgoku's glance towards the camera, followed by a closer shot of his bow, indicates that the

<sup>12</sup> "Kodoku no hito ni Kōtaishi yaku: Uri futatsu, Kōnosu-shi no Kurosawa seinen" ("孤独の人"に皇太子役ウリ二つ、鴻巣市の黒沢青年) [Cast for the Role of the Crown Prince in *The Solitary Man*: Kurosawa, a Youth from Kōnosu City, Is a Look-alike], *Yomiuri Shimbun*, morning edition, January 13, 1957, p. 12.

<sup>13</sup> Henceforth, the English translation of both the dialogue from the film and quotations from the novel is mine, unless otherwise indicated.

shot is intended to be interpreted as the Crown Prince's viewpoint.

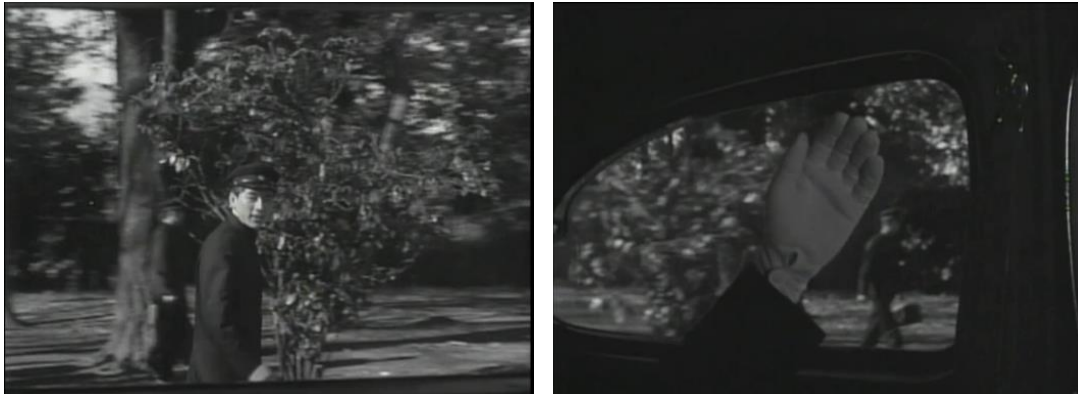


Fig. 4 and 5. Kyōgoku looking at the camera (left) and the Crown Prince waving at Kyōgoku (right).

Despite the absence of official restrictions regarding the portrayal of the Imperial family, the film thus exercises self-censorship, achieving the invisibility of the Crown Prince's face through its fragmentary presentation of his body and possessions. Just as Japanese cinema has struggled to avoid the representation of Hirohito, the same tradition is maintained with the cinematic representation of his son. Instead, the film places its focus on the Crown Prince's unseen gaze, either by providing his point of view to the audience, or by exaggerating his gaze through the image of a large camera lens. This aligns with Michel Foucault's discussion of the panopticon, wherein such a pervasive gaze, which sees everything without being seen, results in subjects self-regulating and restricting their own behaviors.<sup>14</sup> The film's representation of the Crown Prince suggests that, without exercising violent power or censorship, the taboo of the Imperial representation remained intact in the postwar years through the film industry's self-censorship.

## 2. Adaptation

The film is adapted from the debut novel of Fujishima Taisuke, one of Akihito's former classmates at Gakushūin Junior and Senior High Schools and University.<sup>15</sup> The designation of *gogakuyū*, which refers to individuals who were selected as friends by the Crown Prince, carries significant weight, for it implies a unique bond and associated privileges. Given his status as a *gogakuyū* and the novel's subject matter, it was not surprising that this first novel of the young author, who was only 23 years old at that time, garnered wide media attention and even became a topic of discussion in the parliamentary proceedings.<sup>16</sup> More recently, BBC's TV documentary, *Predator: The Secret Scandal of J-Pop* (dir. Megumi Inman, 2023), exposed a sexual abuse scandal of Fujishima's wife Mary Kitagawa's popstar agency, Johnny and Associates. This scandal was long regarded as an open secret in the domestic media industry. In the 1960s, Fujishima played a pivotal role in sponsoring the company, facilitating the introduction of Mary and her younger brother Johnny to the Japanese entertainment industry. It is worth considering whether the support provided by a *gogakuyū* to this company may have contributed to the prolonged indifference exhibited by domestic media towards the allegations of abuse over the past fifty years.

In Fujishima's novel, what appears to be a generational conflict, or a conflict between the young students and the old system of imperialism is not that simple, because it can also be read as an allegorical critique of the US occupation of Japan. The narrative is set in 1951, when postwar Japan was still under US occupation. One iconic example of the novel's critique of the U.S. can be found in its opening scene, where the Japanese interpreter of

<sup>14</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1995), pp. 195-230.

<sup>15</sup> Fujishima Taisuke, *Kodoku no hito* (孤獨の人) [The Solitary One] (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 2012).

<sup>16</sup> "Kodoku no hito kokkai nimo hamon" (「孤独の人」国会にも波紋) [The Rippling Impact of *The Solitary One* on the Parliament], *Asahi Shimbun*, evening edition, May 2, 1956, p. 4; Kawanishi Hideya, "Kaisetsu" (解説) [Commentary], in *Kodoku no hito* (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 2012), p. 237.

Mrs. Benton, an American English teacher, gets bullied by the class. The female interpreter, Keiko, announces to the class “in English that sounded fluent to everyone’s ear”<sup>17</sup> that she will substitute Mrs. Benton today. Then, the students in the classroom start throwing jeers at Keiko, saying “Say it in Japanese, in Japanese,” “We’re just Japs, after all.”<sup>18</sup> Yoshihiko, the novel’s main character, calls her a “whore.”<sup>19</sup> As can be seen in these slurs at the English-speaking Japanese substitute teacher, the novel offers not a simple generational conflict between the young students and the old system of the Imperial Household Agency, as the youth film genre of this adaptation implies. The insults are directed toward an adult speaking on behalf of an American, or as Yoshihiko’s gendered name-calling suggests, someone who spiritually sold herself to America. In the film, however, this scene was changed to that of a new male teacher getting a rough welcome from the boys. English is used not by the teacher, but by the students, who wrote the new teacher’s name on the blackboard: “WELCOME TAKEDA.” The American presence that the novel suggested has become barely visible in the film.

The novel’s portrayal of the students’ frustration needs to be understood in the context of Japan’s postwar economic, political and ideological conservatism that began at the end of the 1940s, known as the Reverse Course. The Reverse Course refers to Japan’s regression to remilitarization, economic rebuilding, and the return of the wartime ideology, as exemplified by the idolization of the Imperial family.<sup>20</sup> Ironically, it was triggered by the pressure from the U.S., which initially aimed to democratize Japan, but reversed that policy so that Japan would become a useful ally in the Cold War. In the novel, one student complains that the entire class is given English names in their English lessons, and calls it “Just like the annexation of Korea.”<sup>21</sup> Although we must point out that Japan’s annexation of Korea was not an “occupation without bloodshed,” as the student describes,<sup>22</sup> this remark characterizes the American occupation as a form of colonialism.

This state of being under US occupation is also manifested indirectly as a threat to heterosexual masculinity that the students, including the Crown Prince, are facing at school. In the novel, the Crown Prince shows his interest in a female student in the girls’ department at Gakushūin, but his interest is inhibited first by the Imperial Household Agency’s cancellation of his date and then by a *gogakuyū* schoolmate who has sold a photo of the Prince with the girl to a gossip magazine. The narrator describes this as a dehumanizing process, saying “This is how His Highness’s will is thwarted forcibly, just like stamping down on the wild grass.”<sup>23</sup> As for the other students, there are references to their homosexuality and impotence in different parts of the novel. Yoshihiko himself recalls his past relationship with his younger boyfriend and also gets accused of being a “vain limp dick.”<sup>24</sup> By repeatedly presenting the traditional form of heterosexual masculinity as being undermined, the novel seems to hint at the lack of power and agency of the occupied Japanese.

Given this situation, Yoshihiko’s affair with a 32-year-old woman, Tomoko, becomes significant. Tomoko used to be the wife of Yoshihiko’s uncle, but is now married to an American. Although Yoshihiko has been reluctant to seep with her, through this affair he is literally stealing the wife of an American man. The novel’s ending of Yoshihiko’s having sex with Tomoko provides a fantasy of regaining masculine power and agency that had been deprived under occupation. In the film, by contrast, Tomoko’s current husband is not mentioned. Film reviews at that time find this affair pointless and criticize the Nikkatsu film studio for merely imitating their earlier success of the 1956 film, *Season of the Sun*, with cheap sensationalism.<sup>25</sup> By getting rid of all the novel’s references to the U.S., the allegorical significance of Yoshihiko’s affair seems to have been lost.

<sup>17</sup> Fujishima, *Kodoku no hito*, p. 4.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>20</sup> Kawanishi, “Kaisetsu,” p. 238.

<sup>21</sup> Fujishima, *Kodoku no hito*, p. 14.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 66.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 128.

<sup>25</sup> “Yaya gimon aru sujigaki: *Kodoku no hito*, Nikkatsu” (やや疑問ある筋書＝「孤独の人」日活＝) [A Rather Questionable Plot: *The Solitary One*, Nikkatsu], *Asahi Shimbun*, evening edition, January 15, 1957, p. 2; “Majime na tsukuri-kata: *Kodoku no hito* (Nikkatsu)” (まじめな作り方「孤独の人」(日活)) [The Sincere Way of Filmmaking: *The Solitary One* (Nikkatsu)], *Yomiuri Shimbun*, evening edition, January 14, 1957, p. 4.

When we contextualize them in the Reverse Course conservatism of Japan in the 1950s, the novel and the film project a contrasting picture. The novel depicts the American occupation of Japan as an emasculating colonial situation, dramatizing a conflict between the postwar Japanese youth and the adults who are working in collaboration with the occupiers, as can be seen in the opening scene. The film, however, is more complicit with the mystification of the Crown Prince, and therefore with the Reverse Course itself, by presenting him as the invisible bearer of the gaze. America also becomes invisible in the film text, and we no longer see any criticism of the occupation. Both of these constitute responses to Japan's postwar years, when imperial dominance shifted from military suppression and censorship to invisible power encouraging self-censorship.

## Filmography

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