

Father Figures: The mysteries of the Japanese family in anime

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Imagine this scenario for a moment. You are a Japanese teenage boy attending high school and attempting, as best you can, to prepare yourself for the pressure cooker that is adult life in the modern Japanese culture. You are studious and polite. You aren't in bad physical shape and are relatively rational and even tempered. Your dad is a widower and a bit of a pervert, but that seems to be relatively well accepted. The real treat however is your grandfather. You see, a long time ago your grandpa had been well, quite the heartbreaker. He was also a bit of a coward and wastrel and ran away from his responsibilities to live in near exile. Literal generations have passed however and now when grandpa's exes and responsibilities come calling it is your responsibility to deal with them. Such is your life if you are Tenchi Masaki from the Tenchi Muyo: Ryo-Ohki O.V.A.s and the Television series as well. The question is why?

Tenchi is not the only anime character with family problems. We cannot forget Ranma Saotome who has the vast misfortune of either honoring or dodging the many leverages his father Genma placed upon his future. Then we have the ultimate example of dysfunction in Gendou Ikari and his son Shinji from Neon Genesis Evangelion. There are many layers of pain and abandonment in this faulty relationship and yet Shinji still feels obligated to obey this cold, evil man. Sure, part of it was the possibility of getting closer to Rei, but most of it seemed to be a sense of responsibility that seems strange nearly to the point of silliness to most westerners. Today we are going to explore the family dynamics that fuel the relationships of these characters to see why the younger generation will go to ridiculous lengths to clean up the older generation's messes.

In western culture, the individual is the basic building block of society. It is all about the achievement and success one person can have in starting families made of other successful (or soon to be successful) individuals.

Family is important, but not as important as individual success, it is simply, another thing to achieve. Japan's cultural values turn this around. The Japanese culture is built around the idea of a good, strong, and stable family. (Hutchings, 2010) This is considered so vitally important that modern day businesses are less likely to hire an individual raised in a single parent home.

Though bondage to these traditions has loosened considerably in the new millennium it is still considered highly important and family ties still have a hand in determining everything to who a person will marry to whose responsibility it is to care for elderly parents and family tombs.

(Imamura, 1990) Our three above examples however are unusual to the traditional Japanese family model as for some reason or another, none of them have the benefit of being raised by a mother.

It is unusual in modern Japan for fathers to have much direct influence on the lives of their children. They are often only off work for one day out of the week and usually do not arrive home until after the children are in bed on the week-ends. In most families when the father is at home he is considered to be doing nothing more than merely taking up space. It is usually the mother that takes care of the child-rearing responsibility to the point that if she does have a job outside the home the majority of the income from that job traditionally goes to paying for the education of the children. (Javora, 2000) This is especially true of the eldest male child who is expected in Japan, no matter what family model is followed to take over as head of the family when adulthood is reached. Simply stated, of the three examples given at the beginning of this paper the most ideal parent would be Gendou Ikari, who continued to basically ignore his child and work even though his wife died. It is not until this taboo is broken by Gendou demanding that Shinji rejoin him in Tokyo 3 that things begin to seriously unravel for both of them.

Enough to give you chills, is it not?

Most of Tenchi's problems are inherited from his grandfather however, not his father. However Tenchi's father does have some degree of the blame for Tenchi's troubles laid upon him. This is because he chose to involve himself in Tenchi's life. Tenchi's mother is dead (or in outer space, depending) leaving his father with the unenviable task of raising a child on his own never the less, Noboyuki, is still portrayed as being a less than desirable parent (by the Japanese standard) and unless special focus is placed upon him for an episode he does indeed seem to be a perverted lay about. Noboyuki is portrayed as being unsuitable for ascending to the headship of the Masaki household, not only because he married into it, but also for living this kind of a life style, which passes the headship, and the responsibility of the family headship to Tenchi. Noboyuki however rarely does any direct harm, which is something that cannot be said for Genma Saotome.

Given the time and wherewithal I could do an entire paper on the abuses that the plump martial artist has heaped upon his poor child. (That is in fact how this paper got started) Genma is again not in a position to inherit headship of the Saotome family as he married into the family, but he doubly flaunted the traditional Japanese system by removing Ranma from the care of his mother. One of the deeper comedic layers of the manga/anime is that all of this is happening to Ranma because Genma chose to buck tradition. If Genma had not focused on his individual goals and instead prepared to live in a traditional manner both he and Ranma would be better off for it. (Imamura, 1990) As it stands now however the lazy old man is not only just taking up space, but taking up space in his friend's home and has left his son to clean up the many messes that Genma had created during the travels of his rebellion. He cannot even return back home as he is afraid that the ancient traditions of the Saotome family would demand that both he and Ranma commit seppuku.

It can therefore be seen that the burdens shared by Tenchi, Ranma, and Shinji begin with the removal of their mothers from the picture and the removal of the traditional Japanese family structure from their lives. (Tamura, 2001)

Why though do these characters knock themselves out to please those who are doing damage to their lives by not living in the culturally accepted way? The answer to this is surprisingly simple, because it would be more culturally unacceptable for them not to let these things happen to them. Japanese culture is at its base a culture based on the idea of interpersonal harmony. Confrontation is frowned upon and “selfishness” is very nearly a crime. Japan strives to be a nation at harmony with itself and the basic building block of that nation is the family. Therefore there must be harmony within the family in order for Japanese culture to reach its appointed goal. (Dolan & Worden, 1994) Many of Shinji’s problems stem from the conflict not only between himself and his father, but between his father and him, both are characterized as being harmfully selfish in their own particular ways and both directly suffer due to that selfishness.

Ranma suffers even more indignities when he clashes with the combined will of not only his father, but of his future father in law in Ranma ½. In some cases to preserve Genma’s original agreement to marry him off to one of the Tendou family’s daughters (which would have been seen as marrying up on the Tendou side and down on the Saotome side.) some confrontation is necessary, such as in the case of Ukyo who was promised to Ranma in exchange for her father’s business. Again however this confrontation only became necessary due to Genma’s original selfishness in promising the already promised Ranma away in the first place. Ranma is left to deal with the aftermath in order to preserve the precious family harmony.

Tenchi comes second only to Shinji in the sheer amount of family based problems he needs to deal with.

Only Tenchi's problems are on a much wider scale. Here is a boy with the universe literally in his hands. His grandfather's selfish irresponsibility has landed in his lap, not only in the arena of Tenchi being a prince of the universe, but also in the fact that his grandfather's many lovers and enemies keep finding their way to his doorstep. Tenchi must deal with each once again to not only keep true to the respect for elders demanded by his culture, but also to keep the harmony within his family that his culture demands as well. If he is to grow up to be the Japanese man he wishes to be he simply has no choice other than to bear with the fruits of the older man's wild oats until Tenchi can take his place at the head of the family. Ranma's troubles as far as family are concerned will fade as well once he does the same. The only one of the three that does not have this option is Shinji, but he seems to be content eternally strangling Asuka to death anyway.

In conclusion there is no real mystery as to why not only these three, but any anime character usually chooses to suffer in silence at the hands of their family. The Japanese culture that each is trying to fit in to demands it, if they are to lead happy lives within that culture they must bow to that pressure and persevere. The Japanese obsession with harmony, both familial and as a culture leads to many a difficult road and the stress marks it leaves behind in the national fabric are becoming more and more apparent. (Dolan & Worden, 1994) Maybe western culture and its tendency to value the individual over the group has something it can teach to our friends in Japan.

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