

“Good Wife, Wise Mother” in 2008: Kobayashi Mika in *Departures* (*Okuribito*)

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Takita Yōjirō's *Departures: The Gift of Last Memories* (*Okuribito*, おくりびと, 2008) won the award for Best Foreign Language Film at the 81st Oscar Awards in 2009 (Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences 2009). It is the story of a man becoming an “encofinner,” his inner growth through encountering numerous deaths that are unique from one to the other, and his reconciliation with his long-lost father. While most reflections on the film discuss the male protagonist and issues around death in postmodern Japan, I find the protagonist's wife, depicted as an obedient and supportive wife throughout the film, worth paying attention to because such depiction conforms to the formulaic representation of wives in Japanese films and presumably contributes to the formation of a discourse on Japanese women. While a few woman-themed films of contemporary Japan may depict a woman protagonist as strong-willed and independent (e.g., *The Milk Woman*, 2005), it is safe to claim that in a number of films in which wives do *not* play a leading role, they are portrayed as passive and understanding partners to their husbands (e.g., *Shall We Dance?*, 1996; the film series *Always: Sunset at the Third Street*, 2006, 2007, 2012; *Wanko: The Story of Me, My Family and Rock*, 2011).

Hiratsuka Raicho (平塚雷鳥, 1886–1971), one of the first women activists in Japan, wrote in 1911 as introduction to the magazine *Seitō* (青鞥, “Blue Stocking” 1911–1916):

In the beginning, woman was the sun.

An authentic person.

Today, she is the moon.

Living through others.

Reflecting the brilliance of others.

(Sievers 1983, quoted in McClain 2002, 380)

Karlyn Kohrs Campbell (1998) discussed that women in Japan used to have an important and independent position in society. With Amaterasu as the supreme Shinto deity and the Sun Goddess, women were the sun. Later on, however, a shift happened, and women were relegated to their place in society. This coincides with Kenneth Henshall's (1999) statement that women have not generally been held in high regard for much of Japan's history. During very early times, however, this has not been the case.

Japan stands out as a unique example, for it is one of the few countries that associate the sun with a woman. But if we look at Raichō's (1911) perspective, women in Japan are now the moon. They are dependent on others and need another source to reflect light. With this, one cannot help but ask who is this other source of her light? Is the woman really dependent on others and has no light of her own?

Amidst the enlightenment of the Meiji era, Nakamaru Masanao coined the term "*ryōsai kenbo*" (良妻賢母, literally good wife, wise mother) to describe a model for modern women. According to him, "a good wife and wise mother would remain in the private sphere, but she would be accorded a respected role within the household as the moral foundation of the family, the person responsible for properly raising and educating the children, and a loyal 'better half' who would support her husband as he advanced in his career in the public sphere" (McClain 2002, 258). As we shall see later in details, emphasis on "homebound wives and mothers continued to influence state policies toward welfare, education, employment, sexuality and reproduction late until the 1980s" (Uno 1993, 294-95).

In this essay I explore how the protagonist's wife in *Departures* is portrayed, and asks how a Japanese woman positions herself in marriage, in relation to the *ryōsai kenbo* ideology, by conducting a case study of the film *Departures: The Gift of Last Memories* through its content analysis. This essay aims to

(a) deconstruct the portrayal of the film's female protagonist, Kobayashi Mika, particularly in terms of the husband-wife relationship, and

(b) relate it to the ryōsai kenbo ideology and the Japanese woman's placement in society.

An analysis of how the Japanese woman positions herself in marriage will be offered using Michael Foucault's history of sexuality and biopower and Pierre Bourdieu's masculine domination.

Departures: The Gift of Last Memories

Departures was nominated and eventually won the award for Best Foreign Language Film at the 81st Oscar Awards in 2009 (Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences 2009). It also boasts of having won several awards in Japan and abroad (Gray 2009). As of December 2012, the movie has an 81 percent rating in *Rotten Tomatoes* (2012), a leading online community that gives the latest news and reviews about movies. "Departures" as a word literally means a person who sees someone else off—for example, at the airport. It consists of 送, which means "to send off," and 人, "a person." After repeatedly watching the DVD of the film with English subtitles, I summarize the story of *Departures* as follows.

The movie starts by introducing the protagonist, Kobayashi Daigo. He is a cellist in Tokyo and has just recently found employment in one of the orchestras there. Almost immediately, however, their orchestra is disbanded and he finds himself unemployed. With little hope of finding another job, he decides to go back to his hometown with his wife, Mika.

It is in Yamagata where Daigo's parents used to own a small coffee shop. This very same shop was left to Daigo as an inheritance when his mother died two years ago. It is stated that when he was six years old, his father ran off with one of the waitresses who was working for them. In turn, he was singlehandedly raised by his mother.

Somehow desperate for a job, Daigo responds to a job advertisement to help people "travel," which he thought was an opening in a travel agency. But he then discovers that the job involves "encoffining" or assisting the recently departed in their next journey in the afterlife. As it offers good money, he accepts the job but decides to keep it from Mika's knowledge.

Daigo is seen to have a hard time with his first assignment encoffining a woman who has been dead for two weeks already. Soon enough though, he manages his next assignments. He is portrayed to have understood the value of his job in helping people and their families cope with loss by sending off their dearly

departed in a dignified manner. Eventually, Mika finds out about his job and begs him to give up his “disgusting profession.” Daigo stands firm and hopes that Mika would understand him one day. However, being frustrated, Mika runs off and returns to her parent's house. Daigo is depicted as continuing to do his job proudly, in spite of Mika's leaving him.

A few months pass and Mika comes back. Announcing that she is pregnant, she is quick to assume that Daigo will find another job. Their conversation is cut short with a call asking Daigo to report for work. It turns out that the owner of the public bath house (*sentō* 銭湯), where the couple used to go, has passed away. Mika comes with him and sees firsthand what his profession is all about. After the funeral, Daigo tells Mika the story of “stone-letters” that his father had told him before he left. He recalls the time when his father gave him a “stone-letter.” It was a smooth stone, which meant that at that point he was happy and that he wanted Daigo to know. The “stone-letters” then functioned as an expression of how that person felt. His father promised to give him one every year, but he never did.

Soon after, Mika receives news of the death of his father-in-law. She comes to Daigo's office and persuades him to go to his father in spite of his initial refusal. They are seen driving to a village where his father had lived alone as a fisherman. They are told that the personnel from the funeral service are coming to prepare his body for cremation.

Upon seeing the funeral workers carelessly transferring his father's body, Daigo cannot help but get frustrated over the way they do their work. He then stops them, and Mika hurriedly explains that her husband is actually a “professional encoffiner.” With this, Daigo proceeds to carefully dress/prepare his father's body. Upon doing so, Daigo finds a stone cupped in his father's hands. He then remembers how his father looked like and of the time when his father gave him that “stone letter.” Upon finishing his task, Daigo is seen hugging his wife while pressing the “stone-letter” against her belly.

Clearly, this movie tackles the paradoxical relationship between death and life. The movie showed how a profession that deals with death can be a life-giving source to a man who finds himself at the end of his ropes. Daigo was able to find himself and live through encoffining the dead. His encounters with death and the grief it produces gave him a deeper understanding and appreciation of what it means to live.

As much as this is the overall theme and message of the movie, this essay will focus on the depiction of Kobayashi Mika in the movie. Mika's portrayal as a woman and a wife to Daigo will be used as the main subject for analyses.

Before discussing the movie in detail, it is only fitting to include at this point a discussion on ryōsai kenbo.

Ryōsai Kenbo: The Shining Ideal of Japanese Womanhood

In the article "Death of the 'Good Wife, Wise Mother'?" Kathleen Uno (1993) asserts that the concept of a Japanese woman to be a ryōsai kenbo emerged in Japan at the end of the nineteenth century. It was during the aftermath of the Sino-Japanese War when officials of the government began to espouse the "good wife, wise mother" as the Japanese woman's role in imperial Japan (ibid.). This dogmatic concept of women defined women as the manager of the home and domestic affairs and the nurturer of children (ibid.). Ryōsai kenbo then defined the woman's contribution to the nation by virtue of being a "good wife" to her husband and a "wise mother" to her children in the private world of their homes (ibid.). Ideally, the "good wife" should prudently manage the household while the "wise mother" should be devoted to raising her children. The woman then was relegated to the domestic sphere (ibid.).

It was in the 1890s until the end of World War II that this state ideology reached its pinnacle of influence within Japanese society (Uno 1993). It was in the 1930s onward when motherhood already eclipsed wifedom as the more important component in the "good wife, wise mother" ideal (ibid.). This happened because of falling population growth rates that spurred the government to promote motherhood in order to serve the state manpower needs (ibid.).

But 1945 saw the official tarnishing of this ideology as this was directly connected to the prewar imperial state. Yet following a half-century of official promulgation, the influence of the ryōsai kenbo did not immediately disappear in the postwar era. Old ethics of filial piety, family state, and ryōsai kenbo may have vanished in the prominent discourse but the ideology that wifedom and motherhood were the woman's primary task lingered on (Uno 1993). The concepts of wifedom and motherhood are not so much activities in households but rather ideas that seek to validate state policies and actions (ibid.). For example, up to the 1980s, girls were given education suitable for a good wife and mother, and when they grow older they are beset with the pressure to just be "simple," thus preventing some of them from going on to university (ibid.). As Uno (1993)

would say it, there exists a clear indication that the state has not entirely abandoned the prewar belief that “women's place is in the home” (304).

Relevantly, it was only in 1985 when the Equal Employment Opportunity Law (EEOC) was passed. Chika Shinohara (2004) claims that this should technically enable women in Japan to receive their symbolic right for gender equal employment opportunity. Women are now given greater participation in political and economic affairs, but they are still expected to fulfill housekeeping and childrearing duties. She further states that women's participation in the formal labor market is becoming extremely important. But despite that, their roles are still confined to routine jobs and they are expected to leave work upon marriage or childbirth (Bishop 2003, 109). Social images of work outside the home still prove to be discouraging for women to pursue long-term career plans; the reason is that the workplace is believed secondary to the “natural domain,” which is the home (Iwao 1993, 156).

The discussion on *ryōsai kenbo* is indeed a long one but for the purposes of this essay, only the above summary is provided. In what follows I present corresponding discussions on the two concepts of the *ryōsai kenbo*—namely, wifehood and motherhood, which are expected to be “good” and “wise,” respectively.

***Ryōsai*: The Good Wife**

The Japanese word *ryōsai* (良妻) consists of the Chinese characters for the adjective “good/pleasing” (良) and “wife” (妻). I suggest that for Mika, being a “good wife” meant the following:

- the supportive and understanding wife
- the comforting wife
- the wife who left, once
- the irreplaceable wife
- the affirming wife

The supportive and understanding wife

The very first scene where Mika is seen in the movie portrays her as cheerful. The most appropriate Japanese word to describe her would be *genki* (元気). Literally translated as healthy, it otherwise connotes a very positive demeanor. Mika has to work the whole day and also has to deal with the burden of managing the household (as implied in the scene where she comes home after

work with groceries and eventually starts cooking). One day Daigo tells Mika, who came home from the work with grocery bags, that he has lost his job. Despite this, she remains positive in her response. She is playing the role of a supportive wife by encouraging her husband that there would be other options for him, as he would eventually find another job. Understanding that Daigo has already made up his mind, she asks what plan he has. Then Daigo tells her of his decision to go back to his hometown. Daigo explains that that is the best decision to make because they have no means to keep up with their Tokyo lifestyle, for they have to pay for the debt Daigo accumulated when he bought his cello. When told about this, Mika merely asks him why she was not informed about the debt, and Daigo plainly says that it was because she would not agree to it. At a loss for words, Mika goes on to prepare their dinner.

Later on in the night, the couple is shown talking, and Mika agrees to go to Yamagata. She is portrayed to be quite cheerful about her decision to go with him. It is worthwhile to mention that she expresses this by raising her hand and saying "*Hai, sensei*"—which can literally be translated as "Yes, sir!"—like a pupil obeying the teacher.

Upon moving to the countryside, Mika is constantly seen doting over Daigo and taking care of the house. The scenes where she is portrayed are usually when she is cooking their meals, standing by the house sending Daigo off to work, or waiting for him to come home.

Mika's actions tell us that in spite of everything, she seeks to understand Daigo and act as a supportive wife to the decisions he has made for them.

The comforting wife

After Daigo's first experience encoffining a dead woman, he is seen to be very embarrassed about the smell that is stuck to his hair and clothes. Afterward, he is seen visiting an old bathhouse where he profusely rubs soap on his body in an effort to cleanse himself of the stench and the experience of touching a dead, rotting body. Upon coming home, Mika presents a freshly butchered raw chicken that was given to them for dinner and asks him how he wants it to be cooked.

This scenario induces vomiting upon Daigo. It seems that he was reminded of the rotting flesh that he was assigned to clean earlier in the day. Mika proceeds to pat him in the back and asks him if he is all right. With this, Daigo proceeds to touch Mika's private parts, specifically her breasts. In spite of Mika's obvious discomfort, Daigo still continues to cup her breasts. It even progresses to

Daigo opening her pants, exposing her underwear and kissing her navel. The camera zooms and it is implied that the encounter leads to sex.

This incident can be read as Daigo's attempt to assure himself of his "cleanliness." As opposed to the corpse he cleaned earlier, his wife is pure, clean, and alive. Despite her discomfort, Mika still decides to comfort Daigo and does not push him away. This way, it is her body and the sexual encounter he had with her after, that became a source of comfort to Daigo. It is highlighted that it is right after they had sex when he starts to play his cello again and appears to have gained a sense of peace despite what happened.

The wife who left, once

When Mika finds out about Daigo's profession, she tells him to quit. She threatens that if he did not quit his job, she would leave him. During their argument, Mika specifically mentions that not once did she complain when Daigo decided to look for another job and go back to the countryside. She claims that she was sad but she did not say anything. This is the first time she demands something from Daigo.

She wants him to find another job, a job that is acceptable and not "disgusting." Daigo seems resolved not to quit his job but actually wants Mika to reconsider. Upon realizing this, Mika walks out on him. She is seen leaving Yamagata, while Daigo is portrayed to continue working and without any desire or compulsion to go after his wife.

In this part of the movie, we see that Mika actually had negative feelings about Daigo's decision of transferring to the countryside. But as she says, she kept it to herself. Seemingly, what was more important to her was to support Daigo in his decisions in spite of the inconvenience it caused her. She leaves Daigo after she felt that this was all that she could handle.

The irreplaceable wife

Several months pass and the movie shows us that Daigo is enjoying his work more and more. He is seen to play his cello, giving us the message that he is thriving in his profession and outlook in life. After some time, it is shown that Mika went back to their house. It must be mentioned that her first words upon seeing Daigo is "you're a mess without me." She says this against the backdrop of washing the dishes and tidying the house.

Their conversation revolves around Daigo's obvious neglect in cleaning the house and the establishment that Mika is the only one who can take care of him and their house. This conversation reifies not only her role as his wife but also her role as the keeper of the home.

The affirming wife

When they find out that Daigo's father died, Mika is still playing the role of the supportive wife but the emphasis has now shifted on her role as an affirming wife. This happened in two ways; her affirmation about his profession and his identity.

Daigo did not want anything to do with his late father. It is Mika's prodding that eventually convinced him to go to the village where his father was. In the process, Daigo is able to remember his father and confront issues in his past that obviously affected how he viewed himself as a person. This is clearly demonstrated when the “stone-letter” his father left was passed on to his unborn child. It would not be too much to assume that this could actually be a symbolism that Daigo will be a good father because he has settled his issues with the father who left him.

Not only that, it was Mika's confession that her husband is a “professional” encoffiner that became the affirmation and eventually led to the resolution of the story. Both instances are connected in a way that Mika's utterance is not just a public declaration of Daigo's profession but can also be treated as her verbal acceptance of his profession. This affirmation from Mika was instrumental in Daigo's remembrance of his father.

In summary, it is through the help of Mika that Daigo finds himself again by confronting his past so that he can face the future. Her support, encouragement, comfort, and affirmation can lead us to say that she is indeed a “good wife” to Daigo.

Kenbo: The Wise Mother

The Japanese word *kenbo* (賢母) consists of the Chinese characters for intelligent/ wise (賢) and mother (母). For this discussion, the author argues that the concept of being a “wise mother” (賢母) is valid as Mika expressed several motherly concerns despite the fact that she never really gives birth in the movie.

During Daigo and Mika's confrontation, Mika expressed her expectations that Daigo should change his job for the sake of their unborn child. She gives two

reasons for this demand. First, she questions whether he would be able to proudly tell his future child that he is a professional encoffiner. Second, she deduces that Daigo's profession would eventually lead to bullying of their child. Despite only being pregnant at that time, Mika's perspective is already that of a mother. Her thought is now directed toward protecting her child and ensuring the child's good position in society. Clearly, her motherly instincts are already up.

A reflection based on the given instances in the movie would reify that Mika is portrayed as the "good wife, wise mother." In being a "good wife," specific instances mentioned above prove how Mika was very much conscious of her role as an emotional supporter and even a helper to Daigo.

All throughout the film, Mika has held on and actively portrayed her role to Daigo as a "good wife, wise mother."

"Good Wife" and Symbolic Violence

The data presented above can lead us to the following observations:

- Daigo did not tell Mika about how much the cello would cost because she would not approve. With this, we see Daigo's apparent refusal to consider her opinions in crucial decisions related to their finances.
- When Mika actually agreed with Daigo about going back to Yamagata, she said it in the manner similar to a student answering a teacher's question, "*Hai, sensei!*". This can be seen as interplay between a superior and authoritative figure, such as a teacher, and a seemingly powerless individual, a student.
- Mika's body was objectified and used as an instrument to give Daigo a sense of comfort and assurance. Sex with his wife, in spite of initial resistance, was pursued because the situation called for it.
- Mika, as she later on verbalized, always felt feelings of sadness and resentment about their transfer of residence. As she was playing the role of a "good wife," she spoke out only after a long time. She kept until the last moment before she aired out her frustration.
- Daigo is never seen helping Mika with tidying the house or preparing their meals, implying that these tasks are assumed solely assigned to Mika.

Chizuko Ueno (1998) argues that conventional gender roles are still maintained in contemporary Japan. She acknowledges that today fewer people adhere to the concept that the man should work outside while the women should do household chores, but she contends that not a small number of husbands are still expecting their wives to do household chores. There exists a large gap between the perception and the behavior. This is particularly true in the relationship between Daigo and Mika. In what follows, I argue that Daigo has been committing what Bourdieu (2001) calls "symbolic violence" against Mika.

In his book *Masculine Domination*, Bourdieu (2001) discusses that "masculine domination" occurs through "symbolic violence." That is to say, the former is viewed as the prime instance of the latter. Symbolic violence is a "gentle" violence because "the most intolerable conditions of existence can so often be perceived as acceptable and even natural" (ibid., 1). In other words, the masculine domination is usually imperceptible and invisible to its victims. For women, this oppression is often not grasped. It is opaque to her eyes. Violence operates upon the individual through the mechanism of misrecognition. In the logic of symbolic violence, dominations are not recognized and the gender order is perpetuated naturally (ibid., 2).

Kobayashi Mika: a clear case on symbolic violence

Sandra Buckley (1993) notes that the formal provisions of the 1946 Showa Constitution declaring that there should be no discrimination according to sex are often cited as a turning point for women's rights in Japan. But gender-based discrimination still exists in all levels of society. Henshall (1999) echoes that it is still often the case that Japanese women do not receive equal treatment with men.

The symbolic violence Bourdieu (2001) discusses is especially real in Mika and Daigo's relationship. Mika's lack of involvement in crucial decisions (financial and domicile), her conscious suppression of her emotions, her doing all the housework, her body being objectified as a source of comfort—all these add up to symbolic violence.

The first instance of symbolic violence against Mika was Daigo's decision to purchase a very expensive cello. While assuming Mika's disapproval, he went on with the purchase. This decision clearly affected not just his finances but also Mika's when she offered to pay for it after Daigo lost his job. This can be read as a

disregard for Mika's choice on what property they will acquire as a couple, a decision that should have been done by the two of them.

The next instance involves Daigo's decision to go back to his hometown in rural Yamagata. When Daigo said this, there was a tone of finality, thus Daigo did not ask for Mika's opinion about the matter. It was Daigo who made the call for something that would affect both of them. Mika was as much a stakeholder in their choice of domicile, but there was hardly a chance she would express her opinion or participate in the decision-making process.

In relation to these incidents, we see even Mika's performing "emotional labor" when she continuously kept her emotions to herself. She was not seen or heard complaining about Daigo's losing his job, accumulating a debt for the cello, and her sadness over their transfer of residence. Mika was consciously suppressing her emotions in light of the changes in life that would beset her with the decisions her husband was making.

An asymmetrical gender relation is widely known to be pervasive in Japan, where men perform extremely low share of housework (Tsuya, Bumpass, and Choe 2000). This is made evident in the film through a dialogue between Mika and Daigo pointing that not once did Daigo clean the house while Mika was gone. And Mika responded to this by taking on this task immediately after coming back.

Despite being "gentle," symbolic violence is still seen as the most powerful weapon in the masculine domination (Bourdieu 2001, 2). This is because in spite of its invisibility, it creates the condition for other explicit forms of violence (Wallace 2003). In *Departures*, the symbolic violence eventually progressed into sexual violence, as Daigo used Mika's body for his own comfort. As mentioned above, there was an initial resistance that Mika expressed hesitantly when Daigo started cupping her breasts. In spite of this, she still allowed him to open her pants, stroke her navel, and kiss her private parts. This may have been uncomfortable and even "embarrassing" for her, but she eventually gave in to his demands.

Masculine domination is an instance of symbolic domination, whereby the social order of gender is given the appearance of being in a natural state or order of things (Uhlmann 2000, quoted in Hirao 2007). Mika takes all this in stride because of her assumption that this is what is actually expected of her, and that this was the normal order of things. It may be seen as an extension of the woman's role in the home, such that this should be intrinsic to womanhood (Ashall 2012). Mika accepts all of these because she is even not aware that there is violence being committed against her as she has been made to believe that allowing that to

happen, by suppressing her embarrassed feeling and discomfort, is her role as Daigo's wife.

"Through continual self-regulation, men can enjoy and wield the power that masculine domination gives them. But this can only be done through the man's continued effort to rise to his own concept of manhood; an effort involving concealment of his weaknesses" (Bourdieu 2001, 75). This can be seen in Daigo's apparent exclusion of Mika with regard to his pain about losing a father. How this information eluded her after a couple of years into their marriage speaks about Daigo's self-regulation.

Yet, this aspect of Daigo's past was the most crucial episode that allowed Mika to perform her role as an affirming wife by helping Daigo confront his past issues. It is this feat that Mika earned for herself the title of a truly "good wife."

"Wise Mother" and Biopower

It has already been argued in this essay that in spite of Mika's being only a future mother, her thought process was already directed toward protecting her child and ensuring the child's good position in society. This attitude was being rendered side by side with her role as a "good wife." It is also safe to say that it was the knowledge that she was going to be a mother that brought about a change in her stance with regard to her relationship with Daigo.

When she returned to their house in Yamagata, she immediately expressed her expectations that Daigo would find another job. Before her pregnancy she always kept her emotions and thoughts at bay, but she was now actively lobbying for what she thought was right for her unborn child.

"For Foucault, biopower is an essentially modern form of power and its purpose is to exert a positive influence on life, to optimize and multiply life, by subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations" (Ojakangas 2005, 5). The logic of biopower is not deduction but reproduction. Its aim is not just to "multiply life" but produce "extra life." Biopower focuses on the "birth and life of individuals and populations" (Foucault 1990, 138). In contrast to this power, an opposition is made against "the classical sovereign power that was exercised mainly as a means of deduction, the seizing of things, time, bodies, and ultimately the seizing of life itself" (Ojakangas 2005, 5).

"It is not power but the living, the condition of all life—individual as well as collective—that is the measure of the success of biopower" (Ojakangas 2005, 27). Sabine Früstück (2003) has used Foucault's biopower in analyzing Japanese

society. In her analysis, Japan has created the notion of the “national body” that places a heavy emphasis on the woman's role in reproduction. Ueno (1998) agrees that “family, which was once constructed as the private sphere, was on the way to nationalization, and children were regarded as public property. Reproductive activity came to be placed under public control” (126).

In essence, biopower sees the woman as the instrument that carries life, life that yields power in society. The female body functions “as a kind of factory that derives its fundamental value from the quantity and quality of its products” (Harding 1991, 45). This logic then “goads women to procreate” (Hirao 2007, 54).

The modernity has developed such an idea that it is particularly the mother who is tasked to raise “quality” children (Hirao 2007). This can be used to explain why Mika suddenly had a change of attitude and became assertive with Daigo. She was already thinking for her unborn child and what implications Daigo's job would have on their child.

In Japan, through the modernization process, child outcome has become a crucial indicator of a successful mother (Hirao 2007). This notion resounds in Mika, with her demands that Daigo's staying in his profession means that their child would be bullied in school. Mika is already showing signs of what Terry McCarthy (2004) describes as a typical Japanese woman's reaction after marriage: excessive mothering, a type of mothering where women direct most of their energies to make sure that their children, particularly their sons, are brought up in the right way.

It is true that the emphasis on the importance of maternal care can be found in modern societies in general. But Takeo Doi (1973) argues that the normative pressure of maternal care is much stronger in Japan. Mika has taken on the role of the mother and there are already telling signs that it is a role that she will take very seriously.

Conclusion

To answer the question posed in this essay about how the Japanese woman locates herself in society, the film *Departures* (2008) was used as a case study. My discussion and analysis illustrated that Mika as a Japanese woman performs dual functions within the context of her marriage. She acts the role of the “good wife” and “wise mother.”

As can be seen in the film *Departures*, Mika served not just as a helpmate to her husband in terms of financial, emotional, physical, and even sexual aspects.

In more ways than one, she has stood up to the expectation of what it meant to be a "good wife." Not only that, she has also taken on the reins to care for their future child.

Applying the concept of symbolic violence and biopower by Bourdieu and Foucault respectively, I suggest that the ideology of "good wife" is a form of symbolic violence while that of "wise mother" a construction of biopower. The former claim is justified by the fact that the set of expected norms of behavior of women are perceived too naturally to be even recognized as imposed on Kobayashi Mika who is almost a background to the male protagonist in the film studied. As for the latter, the reproductive role of the woman is actually espoused by both the state and society. Thus, I argue, in spite of the ryōsai kenbo's being an ideology crafted in the pre-World War II Japan, its influences still remain in society. There may be variances in how ryōsai kenbo is perceived and performed but the essential characteristics do remain.

The ideology embodied by the ryōsai kenbo is so "natural" that it is made to appear as if it were an inherent role and function of a woman. To be a "good wife" and a "wise mother" then is constructed as the best thing a Japanese woman should aspire to be.

Yoshio Sugimoto (2003) informs us that the "typical Japanese" is, based on statistics, a "female, non-unionized and non-permanent employee in a small business without university education" (1). If the "typical" Japanese is a female, and that the prevailing image and expectation from an ideal Japanese woman is a ryōsai kenbo, then we can have one valid answer to the question that the author and McCarthy (1994) asked. Who is the Japanese woman? She is a "good wife" and a "wise mother."

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