

Akira kurosawa`s film `ikiru` and its sociocultural implication



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

During the “ economic miracle” period of Japan, its society went through enormous changes. In what is probably a natural reaction to catch up with the rapid modernization and financial growth of the country, Japanese culture quickly acquired western traits. Styles of business and casual clothing, popular entertainment, music, dance and recreation began to mimic those of developed western countries.

But how well did Japan adapt these new characteristics into their local sociocultural structure? Some sectors of Japanese society were not able to cope with the rapid changes that happened, and could have become alienated to the new way of life in their “ new Japan”.

How do people take stock of their lives in such a new world, when they were born at a time with a different set of values? These are some questions that were also touched upon in Akira Kurosawa's finest dramatic film, “ Ikiru.”

SYNOPSIS AND SETTING OF “ IKIRU”

Akira Kurosawa's “ Ikiru” portrays the existential journey of one ordinary man and his increasingly desperate search for purpose. After discovering that he has incurable stomach cancer and has only 6 months to live, a unit manager in the government bureaucracy, Tao Watanabe (played by Takashi Shimura) finds himself suddenly lost.

Unannounced, he takes a leave from his job after thirty years without absence. Tao is unsure about how to find purpose in the last few months he has left to live. He is completely alone in the world — a widower, practically estranged from his son is, and his employees know very little about him.

Rather than face a lonely death, Tao at first chooses to make up for all the vices he missed in life.

He meets a black-clad world-weary journalist who he convinces to lead him through a dark, and at times, humorous voyage through the city at night. The two, in increasing stages of intoxication, go through every music lounge, drink hall, and dance club, spending ¥50000 and trying to drink himself to death.

On the way home the morning after, Tao encounters his youngest employee, an energetic and carefree girl. He is intrigued by the pretty young girl and tries to pursue her to find the answer to how to live a fuller life. After three weeks, the young woman starts to reject him, but ultimately inspires him to find something worthwhile to do in his low-level managerial work.

He manages to have a park built, a small legacy, well appreciated by the local community, that makes the city a better place.

The film takes place in a major Japanese city in the late 50s. The images of a hyper-developing nation are clearly seen in the crowded residential, open sewers unattended by routine-bogged government offices, traffic-congested streets, and dance and booze joints with wall-to-wall patrons.

Such setting is very much in contrast to the later part of the film, where Tao's funeral was held in the very traditional, contemplative tea ceremony.

The stillness inspired people around him (family, managers, colleagues and the citizens he served) to reflect and analyze the sudden change in Tao during his last few days. As they recalled the oddities of his actions, they realized that Tao changed because he knew he was going to die.

<https://assignbuster.com/akira-kurosawas-film-ikiru-and-its-sociocultural-implication/>

A conclusion that even his family, who have shunned him from doing such radical actions, was appalled to hear. But the greater of Tao's objective was also realized, in that he changed in order to serve his city before he died: get the park built.

The paradox that Kurosawa displayed as the film ended, is when Tao's successor took over, his division went back to the old bureaucratic ways of red tape and lack of action, as if Tao's inspiring action to serve the city did not happen at all.

Sociocultural Background of Japan in the film's setting

After Japan's surrender in 1945, ending World War II, the supreme commander of the Allies, U. S. General Mac Arthur, instituted a Japanese reform program in its drastic plan to demilitarize Japan. The plan aimed to quash all aspects of Japanese culture that had made it an aggressive, invading nation, and transform it into a democratic nation that will not be a threat to its neighbors.

The transformation began with revising its constitution, restricting the emperor to ceremonial duties and ridding him of powers as mandated by the Meiji constitution.

A British-style parliamentary system was mandated, where women were given the opportunity to vote for members of the House of Representatives. Labor unions were given rights in the new constitution and the most radical was the denouncement of Japan to war and its dependence for the US Military to protect it.

Most Japanese welcomed the changes. With the growth of democracy in the rural areas, ordinary Japanese experienced increased political rights, unionized labor force and seen expanding women's rights. The Americans also encouraged the emergence of a Communist Party, in the hopes that it will be the democratic opposition. These changes however, weakened the Japanese economy.

In the late 1940s, America's view of Japan shifted: from reforming the Asian super power to making Japan a strong Asian ally. This change was brought about by the emerging cold war between USSR and the US, and it was important for countries to take sides. The change in occupation strategy is often called the "reverse course."

As such, the U. S. government decided to focus on the recovery of Japan's destroyed economy. Through tightening of the belt, US encouraged the Japanese government to adopt anti-inflation policies and stabilize business conditions. Government began to crack down on the Communists and restrain the activities of fundamentalist labor groups.

Japanese conservatives welcomed the change and hoped to bring back Japan as a world economic power. In September 1951, Japan, the United States, and 47 other countries signed a peace treaty, returning Japan's full sovereignty.

With still a weakened military, Japan allowed the U. S. military forces to remain in Japan, by setting up military bases. Such presence would start the influence of Japan's westernization.

Without a doubt, Japan experience economic growth in the next 20 years, with an annual average gross national product (a measure of a country's total economic output) rate of 9 percent, much faster than any other industrial economy was growing at that time. By 1968 Japan regained its international stature by becoming the third largest economy in the world.

The reasons why the Japanese economy grew so fast are complex. Many factors contributed to this rapid growth: First, the government's focus on growing the economy, promoting industrial growth through tax breaks, import and export licenses, and direct subsidies. This set-up an environment for Japanese to develop advanced-technology products not only for the consumption of their local market but also offering them to international markets.

Heads of businesses concentrated on growing their company by reinvesting gains to update and improve products in order to capture the market and expand their business. Employee retention and satisfaction was a third reason for economic growth. Highly skilled workers were guaranteed lifetime employment, welfare benefits, wage and salary increases based on years of service.

Such skill retention brought expertise in respective fields and in high technology in general. Amidst the improved benefits and security of tenure, strong work ethics was instituted, through disciplinary action for work stoppages.

And because there is strong development in high technology products, the Japanese consumer also patronized their own manufactured goods. To

complete the picture, the Japanese economy was not burdened by heavy military expenditures because it was the US Military that provided their needs for national defense. Such rapid economic growth is what historians coined as Japan's " economic miracle."