

The birth of Golden Week: rival adaptations of *School of Freedom* and the postwar constitution of Japan

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Abstract: The introduction of new liberties in Japan's post-war constitution sparked nationwide debate during the final years of the Allied Occupation. Shishi Bunroku's satirical novel *School of Freedom* (1950) captured the public's fascination – and puzzlement – over this influential yet elusive notion. Serialised in Japan's leading newspaper, the *Asahi Shinbun*, the story follows a married couple navigating the social realities of early post-war life. The salary-man husband abruptly abandons both his job and his marriage in pursuit of freedom, prompting his wife to reconsider her own life prospects. Following the novel's success, two film studios swiftly acquired the rights, and their competing adaptations were released simultaneously in May 1951, coinciding with a newly established string of national holidays. This timing boosted audience turnout, and the unexpected surge in box-office earnings led a film executive to coin the term 'Golden Week', which soon became synonymous with the holiday period itself. *School of Freedom* thus left an imprint not only on Japanese cinema but also on the cultural imagination and leisure practices of the emerging consumerist nation. This article explores the production and reception of the rival films, situating them within the late Occupation-era popular discourse surrounding the new rights – and accompanying obligations – stipulated by Japan's 1947 constitution.

Keywords: Constitution of Japan, film adaptation, Japanese cinema, modern Japanese literature, newspaper novel, Occupation of Japan, public holidays, social mobility

Introduction

Golden Week (*Gōruden wīku* or *Ōgon shūkan*) at the beginning of May has been a fixture of the Japanese calendar since the early post-war years and is the third most important holiday period after the New Year and Obon, a mid-August festival honouring ancestral spirits. The three public holidays that fall within this week, and their sequence, appear highly symbolic on closer inspection. Shōwa Day (*Shōwa no hi*) on April 29 marks the birthday of a former head of state, also known as Hirohito and posthumously as the Shōwa Emperor, who reigned from 1926 to 1989.¹ Constitution Memorial Day (*Kenpō kinenbi*) on May 3 commemorates the 1947 enactment of Japan's current constitution. Children's Day (*Kodomo no hi*) on May 5 is held to 'respect children's personalities, to promote their happiness, and to be grateful to their mothers' (Kokumin no shukujitsu ni kan suru hōritsu [Public Holiday Law], 1948). Considered together, the three days seem to present – in miniature – a national narrative that arcs from the country's contested past, through a pivotal post-war event, towards the future of the nation. In 2007, the ambiguous and innocent-sounding label of Greenery Day (*Midori no hi*), which had designated April 29 since the death of the Shōwa Emperor, was reassigned to the previously nameless holiday on May 4.²

Like modern holidays anywhere, Golden Week not only celebrates key moments in national history but is also closely tied to the commercial interests of the leisure industry. The term itself has roots in the world of mass entertainment, first coined by a film executive in response to an unexpectedly favourable surge in audience turnout. The film, or rather the films, in question were two screen adaptations of the popular novel *School of Freedom* (*Jiyū gakkō*), released simultaneously on May 5, 1951.³ While this formative moment that links the holiday season with film history is mentioned in most reference works and its accuracy is rarely disputed, the industrial and discursive contexts surrounding the inception of Golden Week warrant further scrutiny, as do its connections with studio filmmaking's mode of production and exhibition, exemplified by the term *kyōsaku* (rival works).

The films were released during the final year of the Allied Occupation, which had begun upon Japan's defeat in World War II six years earlier and ended in April 1952 with the coming into force of the Treaty of San Francisco (signed in September 1951), making Japan once again an independent nation.⁴ Cinema, now liberated from wartime ideological and material constraints, was the predominant form of popular entertainment, and its influence on public discourse should not be underestimated. Only a few years earlier, the film industry had undergone a series of labour strikes that, while temporarily debilitating, ultimately helped expand and diversify its output, ushering in a decade of flourishing often described as its second Golden Age. At the same time, the sheer scale and velocity of Japan's socio-economic transformation prompted

growing debates about the scope and effectiveness of the civil liberties guaranteed by the constitution, as well as the new life and career opportunities they promised. These tensions, in turn, found expression in the popular narratives of this turbulent era.

This paper examines the production, promotion, and reception of the two *School of Freedom* adaptations through a close reading of extensive evidence found in contemporary newspapers, film journals, and studio-issued promotional materials. It proceeds on two interlinked levels. First, I argue that the films' simultaneous release was conceived by producers and journalists as a media event designed both to embody the competitive spirit of the industry and to stimulate debate about the implications of the new social order. Second, I situate the *School of Freedom* phenomenon within the broader cultural and ideological context of late Occupation-era Japanese cinema, in which themes of new legal rights and civic duties – especially those relating to gender and social mobility – were played out for an ever-expanding film audience through the activation of the elusive notion of 'freedom'.

Rival film adaptations

The source novel and its publication context

Two films, identically entitled *School of Freedom* and simultaneously released, were based on a comic novel authored by Shishi Bunroku (1893–1969).⁵ Both the source text and its adaptations follow a group of upper-middle-class individuals as they navigate the shifting socio-economic realities of early post-war Tokyo. The narrative centres on a childless couple in their thirties, living in a makeshift home in the city's distant suburbs. The husband, Iosuke, an indolent and heavy-set man, abandons his job at a news agency to pursue a nebulous vision of 'freedom', which leads to estrangement from his wife, Komako, and a descent into Tokyo's gritty underworld. He soon finds himself living among the homeless beneath the Ochanomizu bridge and eventually becomes entangled in illicit activities that result in his imprisonment, casting an ironic light on his original pursuit of freedom.

Meanwhile, Komako contemplates life with several potential suitors: an excessively sentimental young man, a sophisticated yet inhibited English-style gentleman, and a masculine but traumatised ex-soldier. Ultimately, she chooses to reconcile with her flawed husband. This narrative is enriched by a diverse cast of characters that encapsulate a cross-section of post-war Japan: liberal intellectuals, Americanised nouveau riche, junk dealers, drug traffickers, ration officers, and pampered teenagers. Each character strives for their own version of freedom, whether through liberation from societal norms or by capitalising on the chaos caused by the dismantling and restructuring of Japan's political and economic system.

School of Freedom first captivated Japanese audiences through daily instalments published in the leading newspaper *Asahi Shinbun* between May 26 and December 11, 1950.⁶ The serialisation of prose fiction, known as *shinbun shōsetsu* (newspaper novel), had long been an influential medium for literary publishing in Japan, dating back to the turn of the previous century. This approach was pioneered by *Yomiuri Shinbun*, earning it the designation ‘literary newspaper’ (*bungaku shinbun*) (Shockey 2019, 100). In 1907, the rival *Asahi Shinbun* hired Natsume Sōseki (1867–1916) as its regular novelist; all his subsequent prose works, up to the unfinished *Light and Darkness* (*Meian*, 1916), first appeared in its daily column. Yet, as Edward Mack rightly observes, ‘the phenomenon of serialised fiction in newspapers [is] a publishing modality that is often given less critical attention than its prominence and profitability suggest it deserves’ (Mack 2022).

This notable gap in scholarship may stem from the fact that newspaper novels were once so ubiquitous in Japan that their role in cultivating a vast mass readership – and in prompting adaptations into other media, notably cinema and television – is easy to overlook.⁷ While much has been written about cinematic adaptations based on modern Japanese literature, the fact that many of these works first appeared not in book format but literally at the margins of news media has not been sufficiently emphasised. As these works were being newly published, film companies often acquired the rights promptly, sometimes even before serialisation had concluded. Prose fiction in daily newspapers not only created a large, built-in readership but also provided a steady supply of source material for transmedia adaptations, establishing a lasting bridge between print media and the entertainment industry. *School of Freedom* had a pronounced visual dimension from the outset: each instalment in *Asahi Shinbun* was accompanied by an illustration by graphic artist Miyata Shigeo (1900–71).⁸ This multimedia approach would provide helpful cues to future adapters while also posing certain challenges for film production.

Setting up the competition

The widespread popularity of *School of Freedom*, serialised in a major newspaper, quickly drew the attention of the film industry. Even before the instalments concluded in December 1950, reportedly as many as eleven film companies were competing to adapt the novel.⁹ Ultimately, two major studios, Daiei and Shōchiku, secured the film rights and pledged to produce adaptations of identical reel length, slated for simultaneous release in May 1951. Even before the films entered the production phase, critics questioned the feasibility of creating two works based on the same source material, especially amid the material shortages still affecting the nation. An article in *Yomiuri Shinbun* (January 29, 1951) asked rhetorically, ‘Would rival works be a ‘plus’

for the film world?’ (Yomiuri Shinbun, ed. 1951, 4). In response, Matsuyama Hideo (1906–86), the head of Daiei’s planning section and later originator of the term ‘Golden Week’, defended his studio’s decision to compete. He asserted that the rivalry would enhance the quality of both films and benefit the Japanese film industry as a whole (Matsuyama 1951, 1–3). In so doing, he framed the forthcoming *School of Freedom* adaptations within a distinctly free-market narrative of industrial competition.

Promoting two different versions as ‘rival works’ (*kyōsaku*) underscored the competitive nature of the studio system, and the publicity generated by pitting one product against another was viewed as mutually beneficial for all parties involved. *Kyōsaku* was not a novel concept in Japanese film, with several precedents dating back to the silent and early sound eras. Kikuchi Yuhō’s (1870–1947)¹⁰ three-part novel *Poison Grass* (*Dokusō*, 1916–17)¹¹ was adapted by three different studios, Kobayashi Shōkai, Nikkatsu, and Tenkatsu, with simultaneous premieres on March 11, 1917. Another novel by a different Kikuchi (Kan) (1888–1948), *A Beautiful Hawk* (*Utsukushiki taka*, 1937),¹² was brought to the screen in three film versions by Nikkatsu (dir. Chiba Yasuki), P. C. L. (dir. Yamamoto Kajirō), and Shinkō (dir. Tanaka Shigeo), all premiering on October 1, 1937, just weeks after its newspaper serialisation ended. *School of Freedom* marked the first application of the *kyōsaku* strategy in early post-war Japan, a period characterised by rapid socio-political transitions that also reshaped expectations of how the studio system of filmmaking should operate.

Another selling point of the rival adaptations of *School of Freedom*, and a source of public anticipation, was the *ude-kurabe* (contest of strength or skill) between two celebrated filmmakers: Shibuya Minoru (1907–80) of Shōchiku and Yoshimura Kōzaburō (1911–2000) of Daiei. Both directors, who were close friends, had initially worked for Shōchiku, joining the company during the waning days of silent cinema, in 1930 and 1929, respectively. Adding to the intrigue was the fact that Yoshimura had left Shōchiku only the previous year following a bitter disagreement with management, and had subsequently formed an independent film company, Kindai Eiga Kyōkai (Modern Film Association) with fellow defector, screenwriter Shindō Kaneto (1912–2012). Yoshimura had been working for Daiei as a freelance director only since October 1, 1950. While Daiei took a risk by assembling a team of independents, its rival Shōchiku, which largely operated through close-knit production groups (*kumi*) built around key directors,¹³ chose the tried-and-trusted pairing of Shibuya and screenwriter Saitō Ryōsuke (1910–2007).

The divergent approaches of the two studios were also reflected in their casting choices. The illustrations that had accompanied the newspaper instalments of *School of Freedom*, while ostensibly useful for storyboarding, presented an unexpected challenge: it seemed unlikely that either studio could find an actor within their roster who convincingly matched the notably bulky character of

the husband. Daiei addressed this issue by launching a public casting call facilitated by *Asahi Shinbun*. After receiving 1,578 applications, it discovered its Iosuke through a personal introduction by the head of the rival *Bungei Shunjū* publishing house, who had noted that one of his employees, Ono Fumiharu, bore a striking resemblance to the main character as depicted by Miyata. While employing an amateur actor was virtually unheard of in the Japanese film industry, the practice of casting non-professionals was central to Italian Neorealist cinema, which had gained a dedicated following in Japan at the time, and may have influenced the decision.¹⁴

In contrast to Daiei's radical action, Shōchiku opted for a safe, in-house production featuring established actors, spearheaded by the lean and handsome leading man Saburi Shin (1909–82) as Iosuke.¹⁵ Daiei, perhaps attempting to balance their unconventional choice for the male lead, brought in considerable star power by casting Kyō Machiko (1924–2019) in the main supporting role as Yuri. Appearing on the poster (Figure 1) in a closeup, she was arguably the most in-demand young actress at the time, following her acclaimed performance in *Rashōmon* (1950, Kurosawa Akira). Yoshimura had directed her a few months earlier in his first Daiei film, *Clothes of Deception* (*Itsuwareru seisō*, 1951), the very project that had sparked his departure from Shōchiku. As we will see, Daiei's unconventional casting and production strategies ultimately resonated more strongly with audiences, resulting in greater box-office success for their version, while Shōchiku fared somewhat better in critical appraisals.

Alterations to the plot

Beyond the logistical challenges of assembling film crews and managing casting, both rival productions faced the considerable task of condensing Shishi's expansive 18-chapter novel into a manageable 110-minute runtime. This responsibility fell primarily to the screenwriters: the seasoned Saitō, who had worked in Shōchiku's script department since the early 1930s and had more than 100 screenplays to his name; and the up-and-coming Shindō, just two years younger, who had earned acclaim for his meticulously crafted original scripts, most of which were directed by Yoshimura.¹⁶

A comparison of the two scripts reveals that Saitō (1951) struggled to pare down the material. His version was notably longer than Daiei's, and nearly a third of it was ultimately cut during production, ostensibly to meet time constraints. Shindō's (1951) adaptation, while more concise, also involved significant restructuring of the source. Although both films preserved the core narrative, they similarly rearranged the plot to align with the cinematic convention of cross-cutting action. One major challenge was the novel's shifting narrative perspective, which focused on Komako's story and introduced Iosuke's arc only midway through, beginning with Chapter 7. Komako's perspective



Figure 1. Daiei poster.

resumed in Chapter 13, with both storylines converging in the final two chapters. Both film adaptations interweave the parallel journeys of Komako and Iosuke from the outset, arguably creating a more accessible viewing experience while still preserving the novel's thematic integrity.

Both scripts were published in film journals ahead of the films' release to the general audience. There was nothing unusual about this: in the 1950s, scenarios of major films routinely appeared between two weeks and two months before a film's premiere, and only rarely after it had already opened in cinemas (Kitsnik 2024, 52). Shindō's script for the Daiei version appeared in the March 1 issue of *Kinema Junpō* (*The Movie Times*), and Saitō's for Shōchiku in the April issue of *Eiga Hyōron* (*Film Criticism*). These publications aimed to generate interest and invite audience engagement. They formed part of a broader promotional strategy, which built anticipation for the premieres and set the tone for their subsequent critical reception.

Anticipation and reception of the films

Journalistic marketing and teasing strategies

From the outset, the marketing strategy for *School of Freedom* centred on promoting the films as rival works. The atmosphere of competition extended

across media, with newspapers and industry journals framing the release as a high-stakes cultural event. In the lead-up to the early May premiere, an array of journalistic strategies was employed to maximise audience engagement. Published scripts acted as anticipatory devices, akin to trailers, offering readers a glimpse into the films' narrative and production choices. The April 1 issue of *Kinema Junpō* further stoked excitement by featuring exclusive visual content from both shooting sets in its regular *gurabia* (gravure) section, explicitly framing the films as *kyōsaku*. The journal even posed the tantalising question of which studio would emerge victorious, concluding with a diplomatic assertion of equal potential success for both (Kinema Junpō 1951a, 16–17). In the same issue, the head of Shōchiku, Kido Shirō (1894–1977), compared the directing styles of Shibuya and Yoshimura, both of whose careers he had initially facilitated, praising the former for his persistence and the latter for his boldness, ultimately predicting a draw in the competition (Kido 1951, 21).

To further engage audiences, *Kinema Junpō* announced a comparative essay competition in its April 15 issue, inviting readers to evaluate the two films post-release (Kinema Junpō 1951b, 12). This move not only amplified the discourse of rivalry but also served as an innovative promotional tactic. The same issue featured a conversation between Shibuya and Saburi, in which the director expressed his dislike of the concept of *kyōsaku* while noting that, considering the source material, he was on 'home ground' with an approach that was, in a good sense, 'orthodox' compared to that of Yoshimura (Shimizu 1951a, 22). By late April, with both films set to be released on May 5, the rivalry of the *School of Freedom* adaptations dominated the pages of *Kinema Junpō*, which continued to tease the audience through interviews, editorial commentaries, and updates on the progress of production. The journal also repeatedly reminded readers to participate in the essay competition, further embedding the films within public discourse.

In a more traditional marketing move, Shōchiku released a trailer (*yokokuhen*) in early March that cleverly tied the novel's narrative and locations to its cinematic adaptation. The trailer begins by presenting Ochanomizu as the setting, with the flag of *Asahi Shinbun* hoisted on a building in the background. The camera then rapidly cuts to a scene of the female lead, Takamine Mieko (1918–90), reading a pocket edition of *School of Freedom*, by now available in book format. The trailer, by aligning itself with the novel's wide readership, amusingly mixed diegetic and extradiegetic elements to further stir up expectations for the film's imminent release.

Contemporary reception

The release of the films was met with an overwhelming focus on their competitive nature. The May 15 issue of *Kinema Junpō* dedicated an entire page of the

review section to *School of Freedom*. The journal's regular critic, Ueno Ichirō, bluntly criticised both adaptations, stating that neither director had delivered his best work and expressing disappointment over the films' failure to meet the high expectations set by their extensive advertising campaigns. Ueno speculated that both Shibuya and Yoshimura might be regretting their involvement in this rivalry and argued that the concept of *kyōsaku* had ultimately proven futile (*muda*). In a tongue-in-cheek conclusion, Ueno assigned points to the casting choices and, in a 'photo finish', ultimately declared Shōchiku's version the 'winner' (Ueno 1951, 45–46).

The rivalry angle persisted in subsequent discussions. In the June 15 issue, *Kinema Junpō* published the results of its comparative essay competition, with notable contributors such as future director Fukasaku Kinji (1930–2003) and film critic Tayama Rikiya (1930–97) among the honourable mentions (Kinema Junpō 1951d, 31). The winning essay, submitted by Shinada Yū from Sapporo, critiqued Shōchiku's version for its traditionalist approach to adapting source material and Daiei's for its reliance on character archetypes and narrative simplifications, ultimately deeming both films unsuccessful (Shinada 1951, 30–31). One could reasonably speculate that the saturation of promotional content may have fatigued audiences and critics alike, contributing to the overall lukewarm reception.

In later evaluations, critics have continued to regard Shōchiku's adaptation as marginally superior to Daiei's. In an otherwise laudatory essay on Yoshimura, Tsumura Hideo expressed disappointment that the director, despite working with promising material that should have suited him, failed to match Shibuya's execution. He added that casting an amateur in the lead role proved ineffective in the film's more dramatic second half (Tsumura 1951, 19). Masumoto Kinen posits that it had been apparent since the pre-premiere journalists' screening that Shibuya better captured 'satirical urban comedy' and played it safe by closely following the source text (Masumoto 1988, 230). Conversely, Yoshimura and his screenwriter Shindō were known for their more subtle and sophisticated approach to melodrama, which does not seem to have proved congenial in the case of *School of Freedom*. Ultimately, neither film is regarded as representative of its director, and it is rarely mentioned except for the unexpected role it played in providing the impetus for naming the national holiday week in which the two films premiered.¹⁷

Box office success and the origin of 'Golden Week'

While the strategies aimed at building audience anticipation did not translate into critical acclaim, the rival adaptations of *School of Freedom* proved highly profitable from a purely financial perspective. The Daiei version clearly outperformed its Shōchiku counterpart at the box office, grossing approximately

108.5 million yen compared to the latter's 78.6 million (Kinema Junpō 1951e, 55).¹⁸ Energised by this revenue spike – and the triumph over its industry competitor – during a period that coincided with a string of public holidays, Matsuyama, head of Daiei's planning section, coined the term 'Golden Week'.

The phrase entered general use by the following year but was initially employed exclusively in the context of cinema. In its May 1, 1952 issue, *Yomiuri Shinbun* introduced releases of new Japanese films by explicitly naming the period 'Golden Week' (*gōrudēn wīku*) (*Yomiuri Shinbun* 1952a, 2). At first, the term was not even confined to the early May holiday season: the movie guide column from October 9 in the same newspaper was also titled the 'Golden Week of Japanese Films' (*hōga gōrudēn wīku*) (*Yomiuri Shinbun* 1952b, 2). This clearly demonstrates that 'Golden Week' was originally tied not to a particular time but to the promotion of domestic film premieres.

In an editorial of *Kinema Junpō* after the release of the two films, Shimizu Chiyota astutely argued that despite the impressive box office figures, their rivalry did not significantly expand Japan's overall film-viewing population. Instead, their success appeared to come at the expense of other features released that week: sword-fighting films (*chanbara*) and foreign titles (*yōga*) such as Alfred Hitchcock's *Rebecca* (1940).¹⁹ Despite the excitement expressed by the studios that had produced the adaptations, Shimizu expressed scepticism about whether *School of Freedom* had truly enlarged the domestic audience, cautiously suggesting that if it had, that would have to be considered the only 'plus' these 'silly rival works' (*orokashii kyōsaku*) had yielded (Shimizu 1951b, 72).

A volume published in October 1951 to commemorate Daiei's first decade in business includes a dialogue between Tsumura and Matsuyama discussing Yoshimura's recent output.

Tsumura: It is uncommon for Japanese cinema to appeal to intellectual adults in their 40s or 50s, but [*Clothes of Deception*] they will watch. Thinking it is interesting.

Matsuyama: I think that in that sense, it helped expand the audience. You could say the same about *School of Freedom*. A considerable number of people who hadn't been watching films, or who only watched foreign ones, came to see *School of Freedom*. They say that it was the only week during which the attendance of foreign films went down. (Tsumura and Matsuyama 1951)

While making the same observation as Shimizu, Matsuyama reiterated his claim that the rival adaptations were beneficial – a 'plus' – to Japanese cinema, especially in its competition with foreign films, which until then had generally outperformed domestic productions at the box office.

However, certain details suggest that the narrative surrounding the birth of Golden Week may warrant some revision. *School of Freedom* premiered on Saturday, May 5, indicating that most audiences would have attended

screenings over the weekend or in the days following, rather than during the holiday week itself, which had already passed. Moreover, while the films' box office performance was strong, it did not immediately trigger an industry-wide shift towards targeting early May for major releases. That trend only emerged a few years later, as film audiences grew rapidly, especially the segment that preferred Japanese films, and early May releases began to feature prominently in annual top-grossing lists. It was during this period that Golden Week came to represent the holiday season more broadly, detached from its origins in cinema.

Golden Week emerged as a distinctly post-war addition to the Japanese calendar, symbolising the nation's engagement with new or reworked cultural and ideological frameworks. The emergence of this *wasei-eigo* (made-in-Japan English) term also coincided with a broader societal fascination with neologisms, some of which related to the new liberties introduced by the recently promulgated constitution and explored by Shishi with varying levels of seriousness in his *School of Freedom*. Although the film adaptations might have failed to break new artistic ground and their primary legacy remains a footnote in the story of Golden Week's origins, the temporary excitement they generated should be understood within the context of early post-war Japan, where the word 'freedom' itself must have seemed a striking innovation after years of militarist rule and wartime constraint.

The publicity strategy for *School of Freedom* succeeded precisely because the films were already legible as stories about 'freedom', a keyword that carried both promotional force and ideological charge in the post-war moment. The very term that made the adaptations marketable also structured their internal conflicts: the narrative staged the tensions between individual rights and social duties that Japan's new legal framework sought to reconcile. For this reason, I shift from reconstructing the production and exhibition history to examining how the films themselves dramatised the contradictions embedded in the nation's constitution. The final part of this article examines how the themes taken up by *School of Freedom* can be situated within a wider popular discourse, reflected in contemporary Japanese cinema, which responded in various ways to the new legislative landscape and the social realities of the final years of the Occupation.

Debating liberties in late Occupation-era cinema

Interpretations of the new constitution

John Dower observes that the immediate post-war years in Japan were marked by a linguistic upheaval, as the nation was inundated with new terminology to articulate rapidly shifting social conditions and the ideological agendas that

shaped those changes (Dower 1999, 177). Words such as ‘freedom’ (*jiyū*) became central to public discourse, often aligning with themes promoted by the Occupation’s censorship authorities in media and cinema, including democracy, pacifism, women’s rights, and anti-militarism (Hirano 1992, 100–105). *School of Freedom* reflects this sociocultural moment, weaving contemporary buzzwords and catchphrases into its narrative, some of which, like ‘tondemo happun’, even entered everyday parlance.²⁰ The new constitution, adopted on November 3, 1946, and coming into effect on May 3, 1947, also served as a catalyst for new vocabulary, its Chapter Three outlining various rights (*kenri*) and freedoms (*jiyū*) of the citizens (*kokumin*).²¹

The characters in *School of Freedom* display various interpretations of these rights and freedoms, reflecting both the promises and ambiguities embedded within the constitution itself. For instance, Iosuke’s uncle, a prewar liberal, is said to be ‘critical of certain clauses in the new constitution, but he approved of its general direction ... He knew well the limits of freedom guaranteed by the law’ (Shishi 2006, 184). Komako appears particularly knowledgeable about legal matters and takes pride in it: ‘Disgusting! Komako was thinking. This woman was oblivious to the fact that Japan had a new constitution’ (Shishi 2006, 77). When the constitution came into effect, a variety of educational materials, such as illustrated guides, were disseminated to familiarise citizens with their newly granted rights and duties. For instance, Kenpō Fukyū Kai (Constitution Popularisation Society) compiled the 30-page *New Constitution, Bright Life* (*Atarashii kenpō akarui seikatsu*), timed for publication on May 3, 1947. Dower notes that 20 million copies of this pocket-sized booklet were issued to ensure that it reached every household in Japan (Dower 1999, 402–403).

We are not told whether Iosuke had read the text of the constitution – or at least the booklet – but if he had, especially the part that explains in the simplest terms that with any freedom comes responsibility (Kenpō Fukyū Kai 1947, 6–7), he might have reconsidered the actions that set the events of *School of Freedom* in motion. Had he reached Article 27, stipulating that ‘[a]ll people shall have the right and the *obligation* [my italics] to work’, he would also have realised that his decision to quit his job and become a vagrant could, in the strictest sense, be interpreted as anti-constitutional. Among the novel stipulations of the constitution, the ‘obligation to work’ stands out as an especially complex statement because it appears to contradict the ‘right’ immediately preceding it.²² This dual provision encapsulates the tension, also reflected in *School of Freedom*, between the ideals of personal liberty and the imposition of civic duty.

Iosuke’s rebellion against the work obligation, while serving as a poignant commentary on Article 27’s paradoxical promise, offers a subtle critique of Japan’s emerging salaryman culture and the expectations that fuelled post-war economic growth. His refusal to conform to societal norms contrasts with

Komako's more pragmatic exercise of her right to work, a liberty that for women highlighted opportunities for independence in the face of traditional constraints and carried the potential for empowerment, at least in theory. While the obligation-to-work clause was gender-neutral, its societal implications disproportionately affected men, perpetuating a deeply ingrained expectation that they should bear primary responsibility for paid labour, entrenched in a two-tier system of salarymen and housewives. Around 1951, this division was not yet fully crystallised, and popular works such as *School of Freedom* invite us to reconsider its origins and consequences. Japanese cinema of the immediate post-war years similarly reflected these ongoing changes in societal norms, especially through portrayals of independent and even rebellious female characters.

From images of rebellion to conformism

Ayako Saitō notes that '[The Occupation government] endorsed the idea of women's liberation in their media policies, strongly promoting the depiction of liberated, independent women in films as iconic representations of democratised new Japan ... This policy radically changed the conventions of gender representation in Japanese cinema, which characterised film practice in the occupation era' (Saitō 2014, 329). As Japan moved beyond the Occupation period, however, these portrayals became markedly subdued, mirroring a reality where the ideals of liberation increasingly collided with entrenched societal norms. This shift gave rise to popular *hahamono* (mother film) and *tsumamono* (wife film) subgenres of melodrama, often depicting long-suffering women who lacked control over their circumstances.

Parallel shifts occurred in the depiction of working men. Kurosawa Akira's (1910–98) early post-war films, for instance, featured inspirational, idealistic protagonists navigating the new social milieu: doctors in *Drunken Angel* (*Yoidore tenshi*, 1948) and *The Quiet Duel* (*Shizukanaru kettō*, 1949a), policemen in *Stray Dog* (*Nora inu*, 1949b), and a civil servant in *Ikiru* (Kurosawa 1952). These characters embodied a hopeful vision of professional masculinity for the country emerging from defeat. However, as the Occupation ended and the everyday reality of a nation of salarymen took shape, Kurosawa appeared to lose interest in contemporary settings for displaying individualist heroism, turning instead to period drama, now freed from the constraints of censorship. Subsequently, the modern professional man became a staple in Japanese cinema as the salarymen genre gained traction, while a few notable directors such as Naruse Mikio (1905–69) and Yoshimura kept their focus on working women.

Hannah Airriess (2023) has examined Tōhō's salaryman film series (1956–70), highlighting their engagement with gender and labour dynamics. Early salaryman films often employed the archetype of the henpecked husband

(*kyōsaika*) to convey an image of post-war masculinity as weakened or subverted. *School of Freedom* subtly interrogates this trope, particularly in its concluding scenes, prompting viewers to consider whether the film reinforces or challenges the dynamic. It can be viewed as both a precursor to these films and a pre-emptive critique of their conformist tendencies. Unlike the predominantly homosocial stories of salarymen that relegated women to secondary roles, *School of Freedom* also offers balanced narrative attention to both Komako and Iosuke, serving as a more critical and complex forerunner to the later genre.

Sewing machine and social mobility

The first sentence of the original novel features the rhythmic ‘gasha-gasha-gasha-gasha’ (Shishi 2016, 7), translated into English as ‘whirring and clanking, clanking and whirring!’ (Shishi 2006, 3). The opening scene of Shōchiku’s *School of Freedom* provides visual emphasis through Komako’s sewing machine, an ever-present reminder of her diligent domestic work, which greatly annoys Iosuke. This mechanical rhythm is juxtaposed with the dissonant ‘ten-ten’ya-ten-ten’ya-pīhiri-pīhi’ (Shishi 2016, 417) that concludes the novel. Produced by a band of amateur musicians led by Iosuke’s uncle, traditional festival music frames the narrative in auditory terms that evoke a generational and cultural divide: the older generation indulges in escapist pursuits, while the younger struggles with the realities of everyday survival.

Andrew Gordon has noted that in the immediate post-war years

shortages and rationing inhibited the purchase of the material goods of modern life, but as soon as the means were at hand, renewed growth in consumption further narrowed the gap between the dream of modern life and its material attainment. ... One important good in this process was the sewing machine; it allowed buyers, including thousands of war widows, to earn money as seamstresses or home-workers, even as it was marketed as a scientific object of high technology or as a glamorous, even sexy, symbol of a bright new modern life. In 1951 Japanese makers were selling over one million household machines per year, about two-thirds for export; by 1952 domestic sales topped 500,000 machines. (Gordon 2012, 499–500)

Promotional materials for the Shōchiku adaptation reinforce these themes. The film’s poster (Figure 2) prominently features a sewing machine with the brand name *Burazā Mishin* (Brother Sewing Machine) displayed in bold red letters nearly as large as the film’s title. This product placement reflects Shōchiku’s long-standing marketing strategies, which linked cinematic works and parts of their narratives to consumer goods such as confectionery and cosmetics.²³ The sewing machine thus becomes a dual symbol, representing both Komako’s agency and the commodification of women’s labour in the new Japan.



Figure 2. Shōchiku poster.

The premise of *School of Freedom* also ties the concept of freedom to class mobility. Iosuke and Komako, both from formerly respectable families, find themselves in economic limbo, living in a makeshift suburban home. While Iosuke's rebellion against work obligations highlights the burden of duty, Komako emerges as the household's breadwinner, supporting the family through private tutoring and needlework. This depiction of the housewife as the primary earner challenges the rigid gender division between paid labour and domestic responsibilities, a division the film satirises, if not outright critiques. *School of Freedom* portrays Komako's labour as both essential and aligned with the constitutional obligation to work. The contrast between Komako's industriousness and Iosuke's pursuit of personal freedom represents two sides of the legal rights/duties coin, while underscoring the complex intersection of gender, labour, and autonomy in post-war Japan.

Julia Bullock captures the post-war dilemma faced by women: 'Should we therefore understand post-war Japanese women as blissfully liberated from the

“death by overwork” that afflicted many of their salaryman husbands? Or should we lament the increasingly restrictive set of options open to them for roles outside the domestic sphere, in spite of the promises of post-war reform?” (Bullock 2015, 488). The emergence of the ‘Housewife Debate’ (*shufu ronsō*) in the mid-1950s further illuminated this contradiction. Despite the egalitarian ideals of the constitution, women’s roles were increasingly confined within a gendered division of labour. Jan Bardsley (1999) articulates this tension, noting that while democratisation and rising living standards granted women unprecedented status, their contributions were largely channelled through the role of housewife. *School of Freedom* anticipates these contradictions, with the Shōchiku version offering a humorous yet poignant resolution through gender-role reversal: a scenario perhaps unrealistic, but effective in fiction as both social commentary and amusement.

The pressure to reconcile

One of the striking yet frustrating aspects of early post-war Japanese cinema is its somewhat cautious exploration of women’s status following the enactment of Japan’s post-war constitution. In *School of Freedom*, Komako, equipped with a sharp understanding of law, contemplates divorcing Iosuke multiple times. ‘She knew one clause stipulated that if it was impossible to establish whether a spouse was still alive after an absence of three years, divorce would be granted automatically’ (Shishi 2006, 48). Komako is shown to be aware of the legal provision that had already appeared in the Meiji Civil Code (1898, Article 813 Judicial Divorce),²⁴ but its actual invocation by women had remained problematic and was in practice limited to cases of proven adultery by husbands. The New Civil Code of 1948 finally introduced matching rights for spouses, reflecting the broader constitutional shift towards gender equality. On the other hand, Harald Fuess has argued that a seminal 1952 Supreme Court ruling, where ‘a spouse at fault could not obtain a divorce over the objections of the other spouse’, created a divorce system, finally overturned in 1987, that ‘essentially guaranteed lifetime marriage to any legally innocent spouse. This form of marriage guarantee probably reinforced the pronounced sexual division of labour among Japan’s new salaried urban middle class’ (Fuess 2004, 150).

The topic of divorce was widely discussed in the immediate post-war years and frequently surfaced in contemporary cinema. Subsequent films such as *Repast* (*Meshi*, 1951, Naruse Mikio) and *The Flavour of Green Tea Over Rice* (*Ochazuke no aji*, 1952, Ozu Yasujirō) similarly explored the status of women and the dynamics of marriage. Like *School of Freedom*, *Repast* was adapted from a serialised novel published in the *Asahi Shinbun*, but left unfinished due to the sudden death of its author, Hayashi Fumiko (1903–51). The novel’s portrayal of a distant couple navigating marital discord offered a candid look at the possibility of divorce. The screenwriters Ide Masato (1920–89) and Tanaka Sumie

(1908–2000) originally wrote an ending in which the couple separates, but producer intervention led to a reconciliatory conclusion. The rationale was that women should not be burdened with the discomfort of such a radical decision (Russell 2008, 215). *School of Freedom* echoes this chauvinistic sentiment, portraying Komako's predicament with a mix of pity and blame expressed by various supporting characters, though its comedic tone distinguishes it from the more sombre treatments of *Repast* and *Green Tea Over Rice*.

A slightly earlier film, *Jealousy* (*Kigeki: Shitto*, 1949, Yoshimura Kōzaburō), offers another compelling parallel, albeit with a surprising conclusion. Like *School of Freedom*, it features Kōsuke (Saburi) and Toshiko (Takamine) as a married couple, an actor pairing that dates to Yoshimura's 1939 masterpiece *Warm Current* (*Danryū*). In a climactic scene towards the end, Toshiko demands a divorce; when Kōsuke bluntly refuses, she asserts her right to proceed independently. In an uncanny reversal of *School of Freedom*'s ending, Kōsuke falls to his knees, begging her not to leave. In the final scene, Toshiko, speaking to a lover who proposes marriage, quickly declines and quips that for a modern woman, economic independence is paramount. This conclusion, which diverges sharply from those of most subsequent films, reflects contemporary uncertainty, and perhaps an overly optimistic view, about the practical implementation of the new legal framework of rights and duties. It also suggests that the end of the Occupation, which effectively erased the list of preferred progressive topics for cinema, marked something of a step backward in terms of divorce equality.

The resolution of *School of Freedom* further complicates the extent and interpretation of liberties and obligation. The novel ends with minor characters discussing the couple's new arrangement: Komako continues working while Iosuke manages the household, a scenario that clearly challenges conventional gender roles. The Shōchiku version replaces this indirect narration by showing interaction between the couple at their home. In the penultimate scene, Komako pleads with Iosuke to stay, eventually uttering the words 'makemashita' (I've been defeated), retroactively framing the story as a who-blinks-first competition between the spouses. However, the final scene amplifies the gender inversion: Iosuke dons a full-body white apron – typically associated with Japanese housewives – and sends Komako off to work in the morning. This reversal not only critiques the salaryman system but also imagines a radical reconfiguration of labour division. Under this novel arrangement, Iosuke escapes the pressures of corporate Japan, while Komako exercises her right to pursue a professional career.

Whether this portrayal of reconfigured gender roles represented a genuine social possibility or served merely as humorous commentary remains open to interpretation. Was Komako 'defeated' because she was now obliged to work, while Iosuke got everything he wanted? Or did she gain new dignity and agency

by becoming the breadwinner, thereby succeeding in reversing the patriarchal order? Conversely, in the Daiei version, Iosuke is clearly defeated. In the final scene, filmed in extreme long shot, where the couple are returning from their adventures, the husband appears greatly diminished: his once-imposing physical presence reduced to a stark, almost pitiful figure, obediently following his wife back home against the backdrop of a darkening landscape.

Conclusion

The early post-war period in Japan was marked by sweeping transformations, and cinema, then the dominant form of popular entertainment, played an important role in both reflecting and shaping these changes. Released during the final year of the Allied Occupation, the two screen adaptations of the popular newspaper novel, *School of Freedom*, devised and heavily promoted as rival productions, captured the spirit of a nation in flux. In this paper, I examined how the new liberties were activated at multiple sites and levels: two major players in the film industry were given free rein to compete for box-office revenue and audience attention; due to the newly implemented week of national holidays, a large portion of the population was freed to attend the cinema in unprecedented numbers. This surge led to the coining of the term Golden Week, initially intended to mark a profitable period for film exhibition but eventually coming to signify the early May holiday period itself.

At the same time, my analysis showed how the *School of Freedom* phenomenon worked on a broader social level, highlighting the uncertainties surrounding new ideals of personal freedom and gender equality. Through satire, the films exposed the gap between the liberties promised by the new constitution and their uneven implementation in everyday life. *School of Freedom* also anticipated debates that would soon dominate public discourse, including the 1955 Housewife Debate, which questioned women's shifting role in Japanese society, while its comedic reversal of gender roles laid bare the entrenched assumptions governing domestic and professional life. The twin notions of rights and duties, central to both the new constitution and the narrative of *School of Freedom*, remain paradoxical in the context of post-war Japan, suspended between the individual's desire to escape societal constraints and the citizen's obligation to contribute to the project of national reconstruction.

Notes

1. April 29 was known as the Emperor's Birthday (*Tennō tanjōbi*) until 1988, which then shifted to December 23 until 2018, was skipped altogether in 2019, and since 2020 has been celebrated on February 23.

2. To mark the ascension of the current emperor in 2019, Golden Week was extended into a ten-day public holiday from April 28 to May 6. Although the period is often spent travelling domestically or abroad, this unusually long ‘Platinum Week’ was instead promoted by the government as ‘Sutei hōmu shūkan’ (Stay Home Week) (Thomas 2020).
3. Initially, the release date was set a week later (Kinema Junpō 1951c, 50).
4. General Douglas MacArthur (1880–1964), who had been the face of the Occupation, was suddenly dismissed from his position as Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers and left Japan on April 16, 1951.
5. Under his real name, Iwata Toyoo, and prior to the war, Shishi was primarily known as a playwright and director of the Bungakuza theatre company. In the early postwar years, he turned fully to fiction writing and became a popular novelist whose works often depicted contemporary mores and leant towards slapstick. His novels have been adapted into at least 39 films since 1936. Since the 1960s, Shishi’s books had been largely out of print, but beginning around 2013 they have been widely republished amid a revival of interest in his oeuvre.
6. The Saitō Ryōsuke–Shibuya Minoru writer-director team responsible for the Shōchiku version of *School of Freedom* also brought to the screen Shishi’s *Crazy Uproar* (*Ten’ya wan’ya*, published in *Mainichi Shinbun*, November 1948–April 1949; film 1950), *Helter-Skelter* (*Yassa mossa*, *Mainichi Shinbun*, February–August 1952; film 1953), and *Banana* (*Yomiuri Shinbun*, February–September 1959; film 1960).
7. Two Japanese novels most often adapted to the screen, *The Gold Demon* (*Konjiki yasha*, 1897–1902) by Ozaki Kōyō and *The Cuckoo* (*Hototogisu*, 1898–99) by Tokutomi Kenjiro were both originally published in news media. The former has been characterised as a definitive example of ‘media mix’ in the Meiji period (Bassoe 2018, 100–101).
8. Miyata had a parallel career as an artist and a physician, having studied at the Institut Pasteur in Paris. He was also a permanent panel member of a popular radio quiz show, *Twenty Doors* (*Nijū no tobira*, 1947–60) and played the eponymous main character in the film *Conduct Report on Professor Ishinaka* (*Ishinaka-sensei no gojōki*, 1950, Naruse Mikio).
9. According to early reports, Shōchiku, Daiei, and Tōyoko (later Tōei), as well as Fujimoto Pro and Iwasaki Pro were seriously invested in adapting the novel (Kinema Junpō 1950, 21).
10. Kikuchi, the main proponent of the domestic novel (*katei shōsetsu*) genre, is better known the author of the novel *My Guilt* (*Onoga tsumi*, Ōsaka *Mainichi Shinbun*, 1898–1900) which has been adapted to the screen at least 20 times since 1908.
11. First published as newspaper novel in Ōsaka *Mainichi Shinbun* and Tōkyō *Nichinichi Shinbun*.
12. First published in Ōsaka *Mainichi Shinbun* and Tōkyō *Nichinichi Shinbun* in April–September 1937, with illustrations by Takagi Kiyoshi (1910–88).
13. See Kitsnik 2025, 36.
14. Two major Neorealist films, *Paisan* (*Paisà*, 1946, Roberto Rossellini) and *Bicycle Thieves* (*Ladri di biciclette*, 1948, Vittorio De Sica) had topped the authoritative *Kinema Junpō* annual critics’ poll in 1949 and 1950, respectively.
15. A report from October 1950 suggests that Saburi was initially under consideration to star in both versions. (Kinema Junpō 1950, 21).
16. Promotional material for *School of Freedom* designated Shindō as Yoshimura’s *nyōbo-yaku* (wife) in terms filmmaking. (Kinema Junpō 1951a, 17). This was a common, gendered trope for describing the work relationship within writer-director teams. See Kitsnik 2024, 142.
17. Both films have been surprisingly inaccessible since their original runs: the Daiei version has never been released in any home viewing format, while the Shōchiku version is only

available on VHS dating back to 1991. This could at least partly explain the scarcity of scholarship.

18. *School of Freedom* did not remain Daiei's highest grossing film that year, however, as Yoshimura's subsequent feature, *The Tale of Genji* (*Genji monogatari*), released in November, returned more than 140 million yen at the box office.
19. As with many foreign films affected by the 1939 Film Law, which imposed strict import controls, *Rebecca*'s Japanese premiere was delayed until well after the war.
20. A portmanteau word of the Japanese 'tondemonai' (unthinkable) and the English 'happen', used to emphasise the former meaning. Originally part of student slang, it was popularised by *School of Freedom* and its subsequent adaptations.
21. These included right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness (Article 13); to choose public officials (15); peaceful petition (16); freedom of thought and conscience (19); religion (20); assembly, association, speech, and press (21); to choose residence and occupation, to move abroad, and to renounce citizenship (22); academic freedom (23); to maintain the minimum standards of wholesome and cultured living (25); equal education (26); to work (27); for workers to organise (28); to own property (29); and to access courts (32) (The Constitution of Japan 1948).
22. For understanding the genesis of this contradictory provision, it is necessary to carefully trace the drafting process of the new constitution, wherein Occupation authorities, representatives of the Japanese government, and grassroots movements interacted to shape the final document. The initial General Headquarters (GHQ) draft, dated February 13, 1946, introduced Article XXV, which proclaimed that 'all persons have the right to work', while outlining protections against exploitative practices. As the drafting process moved through the Privy Council and eventually to the Imperial Diet, this clause remained largely intact. However, during the meetings of the House of Representatives Subcommittee in July–August 1946, the word 'obligation' was added to the text and subsequently found its way into the final document promulgated on November 3, 1946 (Teikoku Kenpō Kaiseian [Bill for Revision of Imperial Constitution] n.d.).
23. See Kitsnik (2014, 120).
24. 'A husband or a wife, as the case may be, can bring an action for divorce only in the following cases: ... 9. If it has been uncertain for three years or more whether the other party was alive or dead' (The Civil Code of Japan 1898, 215).

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