



Welcome to the final issue of *The Japan Society Review* in 2018. This year has provided wonderful opportunities to read and learn about Japan through publications, films and events and in the Review we have covered 29 of them, from art exhibitions to academic books, literature, and theatre. The Japan Society is extremely grateful to all of its reviewers for giving up their time and expertise. They transmit their knowledge and passion about Japan in their reviews and this issue is especially dedicated to them.

The issue opens with a review of *British Foreign Secretaries and Japan 1850-1990*, a volume published by Renaissance Books and the Japan Society that was presented at our Annual Meeting in July 2018. Compiled and edited by Sir Hugh Cortazzi and Professor Antony Best, this book is the latest addition to the Japan Society's series devoted to aspects of Anglo-Japanese relations which includes ten volumes of *Britain & Japan: Biographical Portraits* as well as *British Envoys in Japan*. The essays included in this work show us "how the Anglo-Japanese relationship played out in Whitehall through the careers of the successive foreign secretaries".

Also dealing with international relations but from a very different, individual perspective, *A Tokyo Romance* is the autobiographical account by American writer and historian Ian Buruma of his time spent in Japan through the late 1970s to the early 1980s. Buruma explores the beginning of his life-long

love and fascination with Japanese culture, focusing on his experiences as a photojournalist and his first hand contact with radical filmmaking and avant-garde theatre.

With references to Japanese linguistics, art and modern popular culture, *Ninja: Unmasking the Myth* is an entertaining and informative study of one of the most celebrated figures of Japanese imaginary, the ninja or shinobi. The author, Stephen Turnbull, exposes the myths surrounding these figures and provides ninja enthusiasts and novices with a clear and thought-provoking introduction to its elusive history.

For those readers thinking of travelling to Japan soon, the new guide book *Japan – 100 Hidden Towns* can enhance your journey via side trips to places off the beaten track. Well researched and organised, this guide contains information about nature spots, festivals, museums, food and drink, and contains beautiful, photographs and useful phrases in Japanese.

We conclude this issue with a review of the film *Shoplifters*, the latest work of Japanese director Kore-eda Hirokazu. Awarded with the Palme d'Or at Cannes Film Festival in 2018, *Shoplifters* is a heart-warming and unusual story of human affection which also provides a powerful critique of Japanese contemporary society.

Alejandra Armendáriz-Hernández

Contents

- 1) *British Foreign Secretaries and Japan 1850-1990* compiled and edited by Antony Best and Hugh Cortazzi
- 2) *A Tokyo Romance* by Ian Buruma
- 3) *Ninja: Unmasking the Myth* by Stephen Turnbull
- 4) *Japan – 100 Hidden Towns* edited by Anthony Gardner
- 5) *Shoplifters* directed by Kore-eda Hirokazu

Editor

Alejandra Armendáriz-Hernández

Reviewers

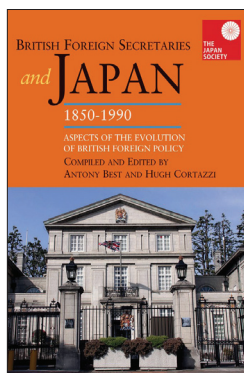
Morgane Chinal-Dargent, Peter Kornicki, Susan Meehan, George Mullins and Beau Waycott.

British Foreign Secretaries and Japan 1850-1990: Aspects of the Evolution of British Foreign Policy

compiled and edited by Antony Best and Hugh Cortazzi

Renaissance Books (2018)
ISBN-13: 978-1898823735

Review by Peter Kornicki



International travel, G8 and G7 summits, video conference calls and the internet have brought immediacy and personal chemistry into play in foreign relations in recent years, and it is very easy to take them for granted. In the middle of the nineteenth century, however, communication was by sea-borne mail, which took two to three months from Japan to Britain and vice versa. Japan was not only on the other side of the world, but it was also largely out of mind. Indeed, it wasn't until 1962 that a British foreign secretary visited Japan, and 1972 that a British prime minister travelled to Japan.

The essays in this book, written by the two editors and by others including Ian Nish and Thomas Otte, show us how the Anglo-Japanese relationship played out in Whitehall through the careers of the successive foreign secretaries, starting with Lords John Russell, Clarendon and Granville and ending with Sir Geoffrey Howe. In addition, the late Hugh Cortazzi provides accounts of the policies of Edward Heath and Margaret Thatcher, the first two prime ministers to visit Japan. As Antony Best reminds us in his wise and wide-ranging introduction to this volume, between the mid nineteenth century and the years of Mrs Thatcher as prime minister, the relationship between Britain and Japan had not only gone through ups and downs but had also been fundamentally transformed. In the 1850s Britain and the British Empire were thriving and enjoyed enormous power that covered the globe while Japan was a newcomer on the international stage. By the 1970s Britain had lost its empire and was in economic decline, while Japan was enjoying a period of high-speed growth and was very clearly on the rise.

For most of the nineteenth century it is difficult to identify anything that could be called a policy towards Japan in the Foreign Office. For Britain the promotion of trade was the prime interest, even though Lord John Russell, for example, was unimpressed by the arrogant behaviour of some British merchants in Japan. For the

most part, therefore, matters were left to the Minister (from 1905 Ambassador) on the spot, even after it became possible, in the 1870s, to communicate rapidly by telegraph. Foreign policy towards Japan, then, was mainly pragmatic and took the form of reaction to events. Two phrases that occur in this book, 'cautious inactivity' and 'benign neglect' seem to encapsulate the approach of successive foreign secretaries in the nineteenth century, few of whom seem to have taken any particular interest in Japan.

In the late nineteenth century there were a number of issues in the Anglo-Japanese relationship that very much exercised the Japanese government, however, particularly the unequal treaties and the question of extraterritoriality. It was only in the final decade of the nineteenth century, however, that Japan began to impinge on the consciousness of successive foreign secretaries. In 1894 negotiations for the revision of the treaties got underway and although they did not reach a conclusion for many years the atmosphere had definitely changed. This was partly because of growing suspicion of Russian intentions in East Asia and partly, of course, a reaction to Japan's success in the Sino-Japanese war of 1894-95, which made Japan the dominant power in East Asia. Sir Edward Grey went so far as to say in retrospect that, 'We had made up our minds that the time had come when dealings with Japan must be put on the same equal terms as exist between nations of European origin'. These fine sentiments were slow to be put into action, but the formation of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance in 1902 inaugurated a period in which Japan required more than 'benign neglect' from foreign secretaries.

Lord Curzon, who served as foreign secretary from 1919 to 1924, was the first to have already taken a serious interest in Asia. In 1892 he had visited Japan as an MP and met a number of senior members of the Japanese government including Ito Hirobumi, the prime minister. In 1894 he had published *Problems of the Far East: Japan-Korea-China*, and he had drawn on his knowledge of Japan's military strength to predict a Japanese victory in the Sino-Japanese war. His period in office coincided with the end of the Anglo-Japanese alliance in 1923, but Curzon had in fact been in favour of extending it for a further period.

Curzon's successors lacked both his first-hand knowledge of Japan and his interest in East Asia but they also had to deal with far more serious problems as Anglo-Japanese relations deteriorated in the 1930s.

Ernest Bevin as foreign secretary in the post-war Labour government had to deal with the occupation

of Japan and the conclusion of a peace treaty, but over subsequent decades, as the Japanese economy entered a period of sustained growth, relations with Japan entered a new phase. Increasingly trade issues, such as access to the Japanese market and Japanese investment in Britain, became the focus of British policy, but there was also growing recognition of Japan's growing role on the world stage, for when the G6 was formed in 1975 Japan was one of the original members. Whether they were interested or not, foreign secretaries found that Japan took up more of their time and attention, and Japan has continued figure prominently in the formation of British foreign policy. More recent developments, however, such as responses to the transformation of China into a global economic and political power are not covered in this book, for the obvious reason that under the 30-year rule the relevant papers have not yet been released.

Anybody with an interest in the political dimension to the Anglo-Japanese relationship will find this book a goldmine, while for those who work on the Foreign Office papers in the National Archives in Kew, it will be an invaluable guide to what was

going on in London while successive ambassadors were reporting on events in Japan. The essays are uniformly well researched and they manage to locate changing policy towards Japan in the context of a fluid international situation in which Japan usually did not figure prominently in British political considerations.

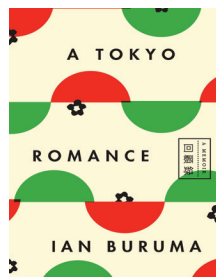
Few Japanese political leaders have been comfortable in English, it is true, but on the other hand no British foreign secretary has yet been able to display much knowledge of Japanese. For this reason, interpreters have had a crucial but invisible role to play in Anglo-Japanese relations, as have British diplomatic representatives in Japan. This book carries on its cover a picture of the imposing British Embassy building in Tokyo, and perhaps there is in that just a suggestion that foreign policy may be made in Whitehall but would be at sea without the acumen of British ambassadors, most of whom have had at least some knowledge of Japanese. One of them, Sir Hugh Cortazzi, who learnt his Japanese during the war, was the joint editor and originator of this book, and it is sad to note his passing. §

A Tokyo Romance

by Ian Buruma

Penguin Press (2018)
ISBN-13: 978-1101981412

Review by Beau Waycott



Ian Buruma is arguably one of the most well known public intellectual in contemporary culture. Journalist, author and now the relatively recently-appointed editor of *The New York Review of Books*, Buruma is a universally respected and valued voice on a plethora of pressing issues, be they political, artistic, cultural or prosaic. His 1984 book *Behind The Mask* was widely celebrated for detailing the darker undersides of Japanese culture, and laid the foundations of his intellectual career. Yet, for such a public figure, there has always been something of the flâneur about Buruma, with the journey he took from a disenchanted undergraduate Sinologist in the Hague to a leading expert on all things Oriental living in New York remaining a clouded mystery.

A Tokyo Romance serves to explain this journey, or at least the beginning of a life-long love and fascination with Japanese culture (be it low or high) and, more importantly, how this culture is manifested through art

and design. Buruma's memoir of his time spent in Japan through the late 1970s to the early 1980s shows us not just how his personality as a youth was concreted, but also how a society caught between stupefying economic growth and the mass student protests that followed. Buruma escapes his upper class adolescence in the Netherlands with a scholarship to study film at Nihon University, Tokyo, but inevitably spends more time in seedy underground picture houses and rowdy town halls filled with drunken performances of live theatre than in the university's libraries or lecture halls. Finding amazement from these almost hallucinatory escapades, clearly serving in binary opposition to a wealthy and privileged upbringing, an enchantment with Tokyo's *shitamachi* (or, as Buruma translates it, "low city") is born.

Home has always been a thorny subject for Buruma, who describes himself early in the memoir as "Anglo-German-Jewish" with lapsed Dutch Protestantism in his paternal lineage. Readers can easily infer the noisy, neon and wholly alien nature of the *shitamachi* provides anonymity in which it is evident Buruma revels. Through lurid and often captivatingly poignant prose, readers are taken through a number of adventures within the context of contemporary Japanese cinema; perhaps most interesting is

Buruma's association with Donald Richie, an American GI who stayed in Japan after World War II, and is widely credited with bringing Japanese film to popularity in America, particularly the work of Ozu Yasujiro. Richie serves as a sensei to Buruma, widening his view of Japanese society greatly with common acquaintances such as Terayama Shuji, whose character is portrayed deftly by Buruma in multiple misadventures.

Those with more traditional interest in Japanese culture may be shocked at the nature of Buruma's writing, with many of the works he details conforming to the principles of *ero guro nansensu* (erotic, grotesque, absurd), as was typical of avant-garde arts at the time, mainly in protest against both the contrived and snobbish nature of high-class Japanese traditions and the Westernisation of urban Japan and its culture. Throughout the memoir there becomes a growing tolerance for the perverse in the arts, with Buruma writing that Japanese society has a 'pornographic imagination' that is far more evident than in the cultures in which he grew up, be that through advertising and fashion or theatre and cinema. Just a cursory reading makes it clear that this holds a great appeal to Buruma, yet details of personal thoughts and emotions are frustratingly infrequent, with possible leads to a wider opinion all diverging before any true sentiment is shown. Buruma also worked as an assistant to Magnum photographers whilst in Japan, and many of his own black-and-white photographs of shocking avant-garde performances are printed in the book, yet they all receive either a perfunctory mention or no mention at all, with stark and brief notes all that accompany such expert pieces of photojournalism.

Ultimately, Buruma finds the cinematic world too insular, drops out of his university studies and begins to spend more time in theatres, growing an interest in Noh and other unconventional schools of performance.

As he becomes more and more immersed in Japanese society, a strange paradox becomes evident. Moving deeper into the lives of Japanese friends, be it through travel, work or friendship (or, often with Buruma, a combination of all three), he actually becomes more isolated and removed from the native group; the status of *gaijin* becomes far more noticeable for Buruma, for his Japanese counterparts, and for the reader. Buruma is forced to accept a rhetoric of "once a *gaijin*, always a *gaijin*", and a feeling of discontent rises the further he integrates into society. Buruma seems to almost juxtapose Murakami Haruki's characters: whilst Murakami shows solitary Japanese characters with mainly Western traits, Buruma is a sociable Western character with Japanese traits.

Buruma's memoir is warm, artful and fond, describing the youthful, colourful and rich escapades of an open and free young man living in foreign anonymity. Complimented with lucid, agile prose that bounds off the page and straight into all of your senses, Buruma has created a memoir that comes close to literary wondrousness. Yet, despite the captivating plot and beautiful authorship, Buruma's feelings remain overly guarded, and there is a constant sense of detachment from the text, almost as though the sixty-something Buruma writing the text can see little commonality with the past self he's writing about. The remote nature of Buruma's own characterisation leaves doubt about what the true "romance" of the novel is; perhaps it is the art Buruma creates and reviews, or the namelessness he is allowed in a foreign culture, or maybe sexual freedoms not *comme-il-faut* in his native Europe. Overall, however, *A Tokyo Romance* receives a warm recommendation, due to its holistic portal of Japanese society, cinema and theatre in a time where Japan was undergoing something of an identity crisis, and at a time when the identity of a truly fascinating intellectual was becoming. §

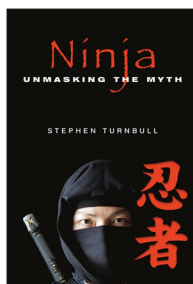
Ninja: Unmasking the Myth

by Stephen Turnbull

Frontline Books (2018)

ISBN-13: 978-1473850422

Review by George Mullins



Stephen Turnbull's recent factual work *Ninja: Unmasking the Myth* acts as an entertaining, yet informative, book that provides both ninja enthusiasts and novices with a clear and thought-provoking introduction to the

elusive history of the now ubiquitous image of the ninja, or shinobi. Although the picture of the *shuriken* (ninja star) wielding masked figure is widely associated with Japan, few know of the truth that lies behind this well-constructed historical figure: however, in this book, Turnbull exposes the myths and sets the record straight.

In the quest to discover the truth behind the black-cladded warrior, Turnbull takes the reader on a journey through Japanese history in a concise and neatly written piece of work. The book includes an

in-depth analysis of early Japanese texts, with a focus on language, and takes a critical lens to examine battle reports from Japan's infamous Sengoku period. Turnbull also casts his gaze to the contemporary world and the future of the ninja myth. He eloquently explores the impact of the influential early 20th century Ninja manuals, alongside manga and feature length films, illuminating their instrumentalism in constructing the current image of the covert, highly skilled and agile warrior that exists today. In this exciting and factual work, readers will find great enjoyment in Turnbull's down to earth writing style and unparalleled knowledge of the mysterious ninja, which Japanophiles around the world have come to adore.

With the term 'ninja' only appearing in the Japanese dictionary in 1974, it's truly fascinating to think that the unknown espionage warrior managed to become a ubiquitous cultural phenomenon so rapidly. Anime, manga and video games are rife with ninja characters, who wear masked outfits and wield sharp short swords. But popular media images of the legendary warrior, such as that in *Naruto* or *Mortal Kombat*, often mystify the truth behind the fascinating historical figure. With help from Mie University researchers, and a deep-pool of historical and cultural knowledge, Turnbull picks apart the myths surrounding the ninja and ninjutsu and cornicles it's rise in the Japanese cultural consciousness. In the book's concise 15 chapters, readers will be sure to see the facts behind the ninja myth trump their fictitious representation.

Ninja: Unmasking the Myth starts off with a chapter that highlights the discontinuity in the ninja tradition, neatly framing the book's key focus. Turnbull critically assesses the language and kanji characters that were used in some of the early texts that allude to the famed ninja warrior. By highlighting the plethora of interpretations of the word 'ninja' it is clear to see that a precise understanding of the warrior's origins may be impossible to achieve. For example, discrepancies in the interpretation of the meaning of 'nin' exist, with some schools of thought believing this alludes to the warrior's secrecy and invisibility, traits which characterise modern interpretations of the ninja. But others believe 'nin' refers to endurance and patience, such as mastery of martial arts.

The writer also introduces readers to the word 'shinobi', which adds further linguistic ambiguity. 'Shinobi' has historically been used simultaneously as a noun to describe the black-clad assassin, but also as verb to express sneaky and secretive behaviour

carried about by anyone indiscriminately. This duel meaning, as Turnbull displays using a historical battle account from 1338, results in misinterpretations and confusions, and has led to certain historical events being associated with ninja, when in reality they may have no bearing to the true history of the ninja warrior. This chapter's focus on Japanese characters means it will be of particular interest to those studying Japanese language, however, to a layman like myself, it is still easy to comprehend and remains enlightening.

Chapter 2 delves further into the warrior unit's origins. Turnbull points use towards the profound and lasting Chinese war manual *Sun Zi and the Art of War* as a possible building block in the foundation of the ninja as a key actor in feudal Japan used for espionage and infiltration purposes. This is a particularly interesting interpretation as the Ninja is often presented as a uniquely Japanese icon, yet ironically, it's true origins may in fact lie in China! Chapters 3 through to 6 focus on the geographical location of the ninja: Koka and Iga. These two provinces lie East of the Kyoto-Osaka-Kobe metropolitan area and, as Turnbull explains, have become the home of the ninja myth. Thousands of Japanese and international tourists flock to Koka each year to experience life in the ninja village. Iga city is also a popular tourist hotspot, boasting an impressive Edo period castle and as well as being the birth place of the widely known samurai/ninja figure Hattori Hanzo. Turnbull illuminates these chapters with fascinating historical accounts of battles and family feuds, with Koka and Iga acting as the back drop of these *Game Of Throne* esc. stories. Tales of castle infiltrations and ninjas dressing up as monks fill these entertaining chapters. The account of the Rokkaku samurai clan vs the Nobonaga family in the 16th century is a personal favourite and highlights the exciting, yet gruesome, world of the ninja in pre-Tokugawa Japan.

From Turnbull's writing and analysis, a truthful picture of the ninja begins to form. Rather than a magical, elusive, mask-clad assassin, the more accurate image of a tactile and cunning espionage soldier begins to emerge from Turnbull's accounts. Through Turnbull's analysis of historical sources, the mystical and fantasy becomes grounded, and the pragmatic and well-trained shinobi of civil-war Japan takes its place: one that preferred rope ladders and civilian clothing too ninja stars and masked outfits.

Turnbull moves away from the geographical focus on the ninja and looks at their presence in Tokugawa Japan. Chapter 7, entitled 'The Shogun's Shinobi', assesses the role the ninja warrior occupied

during the peaceful rule of the Tokugawa *bakufu*. Turnball concludes that they acted more as detectives, using low-level espionage to ensure both samurai and peasants followed the rigid rules of the shogunate. Shinobi men are even said to have infiltrated and investigated Commodore Perry's black ships upon their infamous arrival in Yokohama! What Turnball displays is that the ninja did factually exist and were utilised in Tokugawa Japan, however their deeds are less heroic, and action packed as their 21st century image presents them as. The ninja's cloaked mask and ninja shuriken seem to have been traded in for a detective cap and evidence bag.

Chapters 8 to 10 shift their focus to the analysis of 'ninjutsu': the rules and warrior code behind the role of the ninja. By focusing on the ninja manuals of 20th century, Turnball attempts to show how the legendary ninja figure began to move from the realms of reality into retrospective mythical warrior with supernatural prowess. Books such as *Mansenshukai*, known as the so called 'ninja bible', emphasise the ninja's need for secrecy and disguise while also illustrating the core Confucian principles behind the justice seeking warriors. Turnball's keen analytical eye and use of primary sources truly makes for pleasant reading in these critical chapters. Photos of typical black, sword wielding ninjas, Edo period castles and old Ukiyo-e woodblock prints also breathe life into the book and help provide visual context to many of the writer's arguments.

From chapter 11 onwards, readers are treated to an overview of the recent post-war history of the ninja and its highly marketable image. Turnball informs readers of the start of the ninja tourism and pulp magazines that serialised ninja activities and brought the ancient warrior into the homes of many Japanese

people. Turnball also uses the James Bond film *You Only Live Twice* as case study, outlining one of the first and most influential exposures mainstream western audiences have had to the shinobi warrior. Due to the magic of Hollywood, the lasting image of a ninja abseiling down walls and throwing shuriken, all in the presence of Sean Connery, is still the current image of the ninja which pervades the minds of Japanese enthusiasts to this very day.

Turnball concludes his fantastic book by casting his gaze to the future of the ninja image, and the future of the myth. With Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games fast approaching, the ninja is being reframed as a strong-willed athlete to help publicise the event. With the establishment of the Mie University ninja Department, a key contributor to the book itself, the ninja warrior is being researched with respect and the myths are being exposed. Turnball concludes that much of the current image we have of the ninja is roughly historically accurate, or at least developed from some genuine reality. However, we should not forget that the ninja of today is an entertainment figure and commercial commodity: the world is more concerned with making money from the warrior than it is with representing him accurately.

Turnball's excellent case study of the ninja myth takes readers on a whistle stop tour of Japanese history. With references to Japanese linguistics, art and modern popular culture, *Ninja: Unmasking the Myth* is truly an entertaining and fascinating work. Above all, Turnball breathes new life into the ninja and teaches us an important lesson: we should be critical and look deeper into the history of the things we blindly view as fact. *Ninja: Unmasking the Myth* really does, without a doubt, prove that the true history of the Ninja is just as interesting as the myths themselves. §

Japan – 100 Hidden Towns

edited by Anthony Gardner

Nellie's Publishing (2018)

ISBN-13: 978-4905527497

Review by Susan Meehan



I was won over by this guide book to Japan. Initially I wondered whether there is a market for a printed travel book in this age of informative websites and apps, but *Japan – 100 Hidden Towns* contains information that is not as readily accessible, well considered or well researched.

It is evident that much effort went into the book. Candidate towns were recommended by each of Japan's 47 prefectures and also by a selection committee. Over 150 towns were visited and researched by a team of foreign researchers mainly resident in Japan. The fruits of the research were appraised by the mostly Japanese selection committee and the 100 towns chosen. The towns are not overly obscure or difficult to reach and I can certainly vouch for ease of travel to and allure of Imabari, Izu Oshima, Nagatoro, Kawagoe, Sakata, and Kusatsu.

The book highlights which of the towns are known for performance arts, local delicacies, traditional

crafts, hot springs, seaside, museums/galleries, wildlife/nature and festivals while also indicating which towns are ideal for history lovers, geology enthusiasts, art fans or hikers amongst other categories. It also contains succinct travel information. Entries include “must see” places, nature spots and food and drink information, and also refer to an area’s history with allusions to Will Adams, the provenance of the watery, mythical Kappa or the Emperor Go-Toba for example. An oversight, perhaps, is lack of commentary on Lafcadio Hearn in the section on Shimane.

While the book is a welcome addition for intrepid travellers keen to deviate from the more well-trodden paths, it is also extremely useful for repeat visitors to Japan and Japan residents. It is valuable for those who travel in search of particular attractions, such as food, nature and culture – from Kabuki to regional soba noodles and Akashi’s own variety of *takoyaki* – all highlighted in the book.

Having lived in Japan for just over five years, I was pleased to find Miyakojima, a characterful and beautiful Okinawan island, included. The condensed information about Miyakojima is useful, but perhaps the travel section could have mentioned ferries between the islands rather than just flights from Tokyo. “Slow” travel is an altogether different proposition, however, and may require another book. Happily, the book mentioned travel to Yakushima by jetfoil from Kagoshima Port rather than just by aeroplane and likewise with regard to Amami.

While first-time travellers to Japan may not want to miss out on visits to Tokyo and Kyoto, this book will help them enhance their journey to Japan via side trips to places like Tono’s Furusato Village in north eastern



Japan, a gorgeous Edo-period farming village with thatched-roof buildings in a setting of ponds and rice field. Readers are likely to be taken with the idea of visiting Rikuzentakata’s Miracle Pine, the only surviving pine from this part of the coast, ravaged by the 2011 tsunami; and Amanohashidate, a naturally occurring sandbar in Kyoto Prefecture. There is an evocative photograph of a visitor to Kasamatsu Park bent double, looking through his legs towards Amanohashidate which appears like a ladder leading to heaven when viewed from that position.

The book is just over 400 pages in length, but a very handy, easy to carry size. It features beautiful, enticing photographs, travel advice and useful phrases in Japanese. The information is very much condensed, but encourages the reader to perhaps undertake more in-depth research and to refer, rather cleverly, to its website, www.100hiddentowns.jp, which includes detailed maps and updates to help readers while on their travels. §

Shoplifters

directed by Kore-eda Hirokazu
released in the UK by
Thunderbird Releasing (2018)

Review by Morgane Chinal-
Dargent

Kore-eda Hirokazu’s latest outstanding film *Shoplifters* (*Manbiki no Kazoku*, 2018), which earned him the Palme d’Or at Cannes Film Festival last May, confirms the unbelievable talent with which the director depicts the beauty and tenderness of the broken ways in which family unite functions with this heartwarming and devastating tale of love and thief.



Kore-eda has already caught the attention of Japanese and international audiences for the past 25 years with deeply humanist films such as *Still Walking* (*Aruitemo, Aruitemo*, 2008), *Like Father, Like Son* (*Soshite Chichi ni Naru*, 2013) or *Our Little Sister* (*Umimachi Diary*, 2015) where he initiated the questioning of kinship and subverted the representation of modern family on screen. Nonetheless, with *Shoplifters*, Kore-eda perfected his dialogue and strengthened the approach of his perennial theme by showing the unusual and powerful story of the Shibata family.

Set in a non-touristic and quite unattractive outskirts of Tokyo, the film opens on the daily activities that bound Osamu (Lily Franky) and his pre-teen acolyte Shota (Jyo Kairi) together: petty thief. With a

quick and secret gesture, Shota informs his father the way is clear before filling his backpack with instant noodles and other necessities. While the duo walks back home in the freezing night to share their feast with the rest of the Shibata's, they come across a young girl, Juri (Sasaki Miyu) standing on her own on her door step. Osamu naturally takes her along, a decision that does not seem to please his wife Nobuyo (Ando Sakura) who cannot figure out how to realistically welcome another mouth to feed. With reason: the little house is crammed with her younger sister Aki (Matsuoka Mayu) who contributes to the family as a sex worker in the local strip club and the grandmother Hatsue (the late legendary actress Kirin Kiki) whose small pension supports the entire family. After discovering some bruises and burns all over Juri's body and hearing her parents violently arguing upon taking her back home, Osamu and Nobuyo take the decision to keep the little girl with them. As the couple attempts to convince themselves that they are saving Juri rather than kidnapping her, the family embarks on a tumultuous and touching adventure.

Kore-eda has often been compared to the emblematic Japanese director Ozu Yasujiro for their shared interest in exploring the topic of family on screen. Still, with this working-class drama Kore-eda evokes rather the cinema of Naruse Mikio or Ken Loach, a resemblance the director himself confirmed in an interview with *The Guardian* on the occasion of the release of *Our Little Sister* a few years ago. Yet, the strength of *Shoplifters* does not only lie on the representation of the social reality of lower classes in modern Japan.



© Thunderbird Releasing

Kore-eda holds majestically together the carefully paced scenario before unfolding a painful truth as the story goes and finally reveals the genuine nature of a family for whom we developed a profound attachment. The cast of talented actors wonderfully supports the authenticity of the links uniting the Shibata's together as the viewer finds himself blindly assuming the parentage of the protagonists, which emphasises the surprising and powerful outcome of the film where the tensions built up throughout finally achieve a climatic and deceiving end. Kore-eda's mastery certainly dwells in his ability to represent his characters delicately oscillating between poor morale and genuine love for each other with in background the suffocating anxiety of not belonging to anyone or anywhere. The director seems indecisive, not able to choose whether the fragmented clan is either evil or simply too ingenuous for this world, which brings out the deeply humane aspect of the film.

This celebration of human nature is shown in a series of insightful scenes, dazzling in their simple ability to shake the audience to the core in a matter of seconds. It is the case in the sequence when Shota trains Juri (whose name is changed to Rin after joining the Shibata's clan) to shoplifting and the little girl get caught. Surprisingly, the owner of the shop offers her a lolly rather than telling her off and advises Shota not to involve his little sister in his bad habits. In the same vein, in a tender and evocative scene Osamu and Nobuyo finally find themselves alone in the house and take the chance to have sex after what seems to be an eternity, revealing the genuine attachment that ties the two together. All in all, *Shoplifters* let us fathom the assumption that the lack of material means can be made up with sincere human connection and affection. Daily outburst of simple happiness such as a day at the beach, the meals eaten at the family's diner table, the bath shared together make us root for the Shibata's and make us hopeful that it will show them the way to redemption. But it is not the case. Kore-eda shows the Shibata's as both endearing and deceitful, something that prevent his film from falling in unnecessary pathos and rather, turns it into a wise and subtle tale.

To conclude, with his latest film Kore-eda finds his own way to make a powerful and necessary social critic within a genuinely touching modern melodrama that owe him to integrate the legacy of emblematic filmmaker who decided to give a voice to the outcasts of the society. A well-deserved Palme d'Or and a film that we could not recommend to watch more. §