



Asadora heroine and the idealization of *Furusato*

Bawuk Respati |

To cite this article: Bawuk Respati | (2022) *Asadora* heroine and the idealization of *Furusato*, Cogent Arts & Humanities, 9:1, 2088067, DOI: [10.1080/23311983.2022.2088067](https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2022.2088067)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2022.2088067>



© 2022 The Author(s). This open access article is distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution (CC-BY) 4.0 license.



Published online: 10 Jun 2022.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



CULTURE, MEDIA & FILM | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Asadora heroine and the idealization of *Furusato*

Bawuk Respati^{1*}

Abstract: *Asadora* (morning drama) has been considered an important part of NHK's repertoire as Japan's only public broadcaster. This paper problematizes a narrative pattern applied in *asadora* called *jōkyō*. This narrative pattern has the *asadora* heroine moving from her rural hometown to the urban capital city of Tokyo in the course of the story, as seen in *Hiyokko* (2017) and *Ama-chan* (2013). Such a pattern serves as a storytelling strategy used for emphasizing the ideal values of *furusato* (hometown). To get a holistic comprehension of this phenomenon, close reading method on the narrative is employed in the analysis. The finding of this research shows that *asadora* as a medium is utilized through the public broadcaster NHK to achieve socio-cultural sustainability.

Subjects: Japanese Studies; Television; Television Studies

Keywords: *asadora*; *furusato*; narrative; Japan; heroine

Received: 24 September 2021
Accepted: 07 June 2022

*Corresponding author: Bawuk Respati Faculty of Film and Television, Jakarta Institute of the Arts, Jakarta, Indonesia.
Email respati.bawuk@gmail.com

Reviewing editor:
Lincoln Geraghty, School of Media and Performing Arts, University of Portsmouth, Portsmouth United Kingdom

Additional information is available at the end of the article

1. Introduction

Asadora—officially, *renzoku terebi shōsetsu* (serialized television novel)—is a popular program produced by Japan's public broadcaster, NHK (*Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai*). Throughout its history that started in 1961, *asadora* has arguably established itself as a unique Japanese media product. The genre stands out among the many variations of fictional drama series made for television because of its specificity in format. As the vernacular term that derived from the words *asa* ("morning") and *dorama* ("drama") suggests, *asadora* airs every morning, six¹ days a week—making it a constant part of the Japanese people's routine. Its episodes are short, lasting only for 15 minutes. Because an *asadora* production is typically broadcast for a period of six months, an *asadora* series is constructed of an abundance of short episodes constituting a relatively large-scale narrative. Its daily presence in Japanese national television until today also makes *asadora* as one of the last remaining television programs in Japan that can still claim to have a "national audience" (Scherer & Thelen, 2017, 3).

Asadora's position within NHK's repertoire is related to NHK's mission as Japan's only public broadcaster. In general, public service broadcasting "should be of good 'quality' (a key term in

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bawuk Respati is a lecturer and researcher in Faculty of Film and Television, Jakarta Institute of the Arts. She graduated with a bachelor's degree in Film Studies from the same institution in 2015. Then, in 2019, she gained her master's degree in Japanese Studies, after completing her studies in School of Strategic and Global Studies, Universitas Indonesia. Her research interests include film and media studies, celebrity studies, and Japanese popular culture.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

This article discusses the Japanese television drama, familiarly referred to as "*asadora*" (morning drama). The discussion especially focuses on how this specific type of television drama tells its story through mostly female character and exploration of the differences between the city and the village, to emphasize certain conservative values that exists in Japanese society. Through this research, we examine how Japanese television becomes an important tool in sustaining the values of Japanese society.

recent debates) and responsive to the needs of all groups in modern culture” (O’Sullivan et al., 2006, 251). Harvey (1998, 139) has suggested that NHK’s mission is related to education. One of the more specific agendas, as reflected in the article 81 of Japan Broadcast Act, is to assist the preservation of past Japanese distinguished culture. In this regard, *asadora* contains certain educational values related to the social and cultural life of Japanese society. These educational values are communicated through female-centered stories within a specific regional and historical context. *Asadora* is known for stories that champion “an ideology of ‘social progress’ with regard to the status of women . . . but at the same time holding up for emulation of traditional values such as filial loyalty and self-sacrifice” (Harvey, 1998, 133). The main protagonist is called the “*asadora* heroine” and her persona becomes an important factor that makes *asadora* popular. The stories are also framed within a specific regional context by focusing some parts of the story on certain (sometimes underexposed) areas in Japan, as well as a specific historical context by referencing “great national narratives” (Scherer & Thelen, 2017, 5), such as the World War II.

NHK’s responsibility as a public broadcaster means that the production of *asadora* is inseparable from the agenda of influencing its audience, the Japanese people. According to Van den Bulck (2001, 57), “all PSBs [public service broadcasting] in modern industrial societies have contributed to the creation of an ‘imagined community’ for the modern nation-state.” In this light, through its female-centered stories, which are contextualized within certain regional and historical contexts, *asadora* is consciously produced and broadcast to construct an ideal image of Japanese social and cultural life that “represents (no matter how implicitly) the national interest” (McQuail et al., 1992, 9, cited in Van den Bulck 2001, 57). To be able to fulfill this objective, there must be certain aspects of *asadora* that are carefully considered and constructed. At the heart of a television program such as *asadora*, the narrative plays an important role in getting the message across to the audience, especially because the power of narrative “resides in its ability to create, form, refashion, and reclaim identity” (Rodriguez & Fortier, 2007, 7).

One of the recurring storytelling strategies used in *asadora* is a narrative pattern called *jōkyō* (translated: “going to the capital”). Harvey (1998, 143) calls this term “a kind of *asadora* sub-genre, ” in which the stories always involve the heroine moving away from her rural hometown to the capital city. In these narratives, moving away from the comfortable, idyllic rural setting to the urban, metropolitan city results in a life-changing transformation of the heroine. A recent *asadora* titled *Hiyokko* (2017) is a prime example of the application of this narrative pattern. This story is set during the period of Japan’s postwar economic growth in mid-1960s, and its heroine, Mineko, moves away from her village in Ibaraki Prefecture to Tokyo, in order to find employment. A variation on this narrative that somewhat twists the conventions of the pattern can be found in an earlier production, *Ama-chan* (2013), which has the heroine, Aki, a young Tokyo-born girl, discovering her mother’s hometown in Iwate Prefecture, only to return to Tokyo mid-story to seek fame as an idol,² before finally coming back to her hometown as part of the relief effort after the devastating earthquake and tsunami in March 2011.

What is most interesting about this *jōkyō* pattern is that although an important turning point of the series is the move from a rural to an urban setting, the *jōkyō* pattern, as it commonly unfolds in *asadora*, can be read as a strategy to re-emphasize the idealism of rural life. As Scherer and Thelen (2017, 1) have suggested, *asadora* as an institution function in constructing a national identity that is related to a conservative concept of ideal Japanese life represented within a rural landscape. The *jōkyō* process, while it displaces the heroine to an urban setting, actually re-emphasizes ideal rural values as the heroine realizes and reminisces about the charm of the life and the hometown she has left behind. Through this displacement, there seems to be a kind of idealization of *furusato* (hometown)—a concept quite specific within the context of Japan. The concept of *furusato* in Japanese society relates to ideas about cultural identity and reflects the Japanese people’s sense of belonging to a certain idea about the home.

In this paper, I will argue that the narrative pattern *jōkyō* forms and strengthens ideal rural values by contrasting them with urban values. I contend that the way in which *asadora* tells its story by highlighting the difference between ideal rural life and its urban counterpart, is an important strategy to re-establish the idea of *furusato* within the consciousness of the Japanese people. In other words, the main objective of this paper is to analyze the idea of *furusato* portrayed in *asadora* as one of Japan's efforts to maintain its cultural identity. *Asadora* as a television genre becomes central in understanding "how the concept of television as Japan's 'National Medium'" is still relevant even today, for it is through television that "the Japanese people re-constructed their national memory and identity, and also their image of the future" (Yoshimi, 2005, 546).

Analysis will be done on selected *asadora* texts—the two titles mentioned above—through a combination of close textual reading and discourse analysis. Because this research is mostly concerned with narrative patterns, the textual analysis focuses on the narrative aspects of *asadora*. Then the findings from the first phase of analysis are used in the discourse analysis to further explain the meaning behind rural and urban values as represented in *asadora*, as well as in the discourse of *furusato* itself.

Hiyokko and *Ama-chan* were chosen in particular for a number of reasons. First, because this research is mostly concerned with the narrative pattern of *jōkyō*, in which a portion of the story takes place in the capital city of Tokyo, these two titles represent *asadora* productions made by the Tokyo branch of NHK. Textually, both dramas also have a relatively equal balance between the rural setting (Ibaraki for *Hiyokko* and Iwate for *Ama-chan*) and the city of Tokyo, which I believe will be helpful in illustrating the importance of the move from one to the other. That said, these two dramas also represent contradictory *jōkyō* variations—*Hiyokko* is the quintessential classic version of the narrative, while *Ama-chan* represents a twist on its conventions. Though these two dramas initially offer contrasting values about the urban/rural divide, eventually both dramas deliver the typical *asadora* "feel-good" message about the importance of community.

2. Urban-Rural relationships and the concept of *furusato*

The two most important aspects of the *jōkyō* narrative pattern of *asadora* are the concepts of urban and rural. What exactly do these two concepts signify? Typically, the urban-rural connection is regarded as a dichotomy that leads to two opposing schools of thought (Davoudi & Stead, 2002, 2). At one end of the spectrum is the anti-urban view, which "idealized and regretted the disappearance of rural life" (2002, 2). In this view, the countryside is portrayed as "a socially cohesive and a morally superior community of neighborly rural population" (2002, 3). In contrast, urbanization is represented as a destructive thing. Conversely, there is the pro-urban view, which "considered urbanization as the engine of progress, innovation and modernization" (2002, 2). It suggests that every nation must go through a boom in urbanization as they transition from agrarian to industrial societies. The rise of urbanization is thus viewed in relation to the advancement of civilization.

It is almost impossible to define the city without relating it to the countryside. As Jansson (2013) argued, "The meaning of the city always depends on its relation to its 'others'." Within this opposition, what ultimately determines the difference between the city and the country is not necessarily "a matter of landscape, but also, and probably more significantly, a matter of way of life" (2013, 90). The general understanding of the city is a place of "complex organizations of flows, (trans)actions, and progress" (2013, 90). This understanding is only possible because there is a general awareness that there is *also another* way of life, "marked by entirely different qualities, such as rootedness, community, and tradition" (2013, 90).

In the case of Japan, the last century has seen the nation transforming into an urbanized country (Ortiz-Moya & Moreno, 2017, 4). Here, the significance of urban-rural relationship in Japan is characterized by the specific concept of *furusato*. *Furusato* is commonly translated into English as "hometown" or "native place." According to Morrison (2013), the idea of *furusato* is

“tightly connected with feelings of nostalgia” and a “warm, fuzzy feeling.” Though this “warm, fuzzy feeling” may be debatable, the general understanding is that *urusato* is not necessarily someone’s birthplace. Whether one is born there or not, if a place evokes feelings of nostalgia, it can be called *urusato*. According to Ivy (1995, 104), *urusato* “resides in the memory, but is linked to tangible reminders of the past.” It has also been pointed out that *urusato* has a temporal dimension (Morrison, 2013, 2; Robertson, 1998; 495). The word *urusato* indicates a place from the past. A place can be called *urusato* only after it has been left behind. However, *urusato* also occupies a place in the future. In this regard, it becomes the place to which a person wishes to ultimately return. The wish to return can be said to be motivated by nostalgia and provoked by dissatisfaction with the present (Robertson, 1998, 495). Thus, it can be said that *urusato* embodies a place that is thought to be ideal by the Japanese people.

Furthermore, *urusato* can also be described as “a feeling, rather than an actual place” (Morrison, 2013, 3). It is argued that this concept of *urusato* began sometime after Japan’s modernization in the Meiji period. During the rush to modernize the nation, much of what was known as “the traditional way of life” was lost. As the majority of Japanese grew further and further away from their rural roots—urbanization being the main factor, the notion of *urusato* expanded “to become a more capacious metaphor, ... and thus there is now a proliferation of national, generalized *urusato*” (Ivy, 1995, 104).

In this regard, there is a transformation happening: *urusato* shifted from signifying the concrete birthplace of an individual, to symbolizing the home of the heart—a place accessible to every Japanese. As Ivy (1995, 103) already suggested, “The notion of *urusato* has thus proved to be labile and shifting one, open to conservative political uses as well as to sharply antiauthoritarian attempts to reimagine the democratic possibilities of community.” Whether conservative or progressive, the term *urusato* ends up supposing a kind of homogeneity of Japaneseness and of countryside (Scherer & Thelen, 2017, 6).

Within the discourse of the urban-rural relationship, *urusato* represents warmth, naturalness, and basic human values. Meanwhile, negative qualities, such as coldness, artifice, and dehumanization are attributed to the city. In this regard, *urusato* and the city are positioned in binary opposition; they are two ends of a spectrum forming two halves of a whole, each with a distinct role and function. Regarded as pre-modern, *urusato* is generally depicted as a home in the countryside, thus the concept is closely linked with rural areas. The concept of *urusato* connotes “strong social bonds within the family and village community, [it stands] for tradition and modesty, and this functions as a counter-concept to urban life” (Scherer & Thelen, 2017, 6). Ultimately, *urusato*’s development as a concept in modern society very much depends upon the existence of the city.

According to Morrison (2013), “Wrapped in ideas about nature, cultural identity, and the nation, *urusato* is a way to understand social, political, and psychological changes that resulted from Japan’s modernization, and a reflection of the Japanese people’s deepest-held beliefs about the home.” Historically, the image of *urusato* has evolved to become more and more abstract. Along with this shift, *urusato* has also moved from the individual to the collective, and from a representation of localism to an emblem of the national. Consequently, *urusato* no longer belongs to a select few; it is now the possession of every Japanese.

Moreover, it is also important to note that the idea of *urusato* tends to be connected to maternal and feminine images—mostly related to the image of a “mother”. According to Morrison (2015) who examined a number of literary texts concerning the image of *urusato*, the tendency of relating *urusato* with the image of a mother contains certain gender-biased aspects. Even when *urusato* is closely connected to the image of a mother, its discourse actually lacks female perspective. Robertson (1998) once emphasized that the concept of “*urusato*-as-mother” is closely connected to the patriarchal ideology hidden behind the process of *urusato-zukuri*

(literally, “the making of *furusato*”). In this regard, *furusato-zukuri* can be considered as a technology “with power to control the field of social meaning and thus produce, promote, and ‘implant’ representations of gender” (1998, 124). In other words, the discourse of *furusato* is actually male-dominated. These findings are interesting to consider in the context of *asadora*, because in *asadora*, the perspective used to idealize the idea of *furusato* is actually the female perspective, which is through its protagonist, the *asadora* heroine.

3. Identifying with the *Asadora* heroine

As already mentioned above, one of the main characteristics of *asadora* is its tradition of portraying female-centered stories. The *asadora*’s specialization in female representation gave birth to the “*asadora* heroine,” which refers to the main character as well as the actress playing said character. The term is interesting to examine, because it is the emphasis on traditional femininity in relation to the heroic figure that moves the *asadora*’s narrative along.

In its early years, *asadora* did not specifically spotlight female characters as protagonists. However, pioneering productions such as *Oshin* (1983–1984), which happened to be the first *asadora* written by female writers, presented viewers with a prototype of heroic female figures that audiences, especially women, could look up to. Based on a 2016 report by NHK Broadcasting Culture Research Institute, *asadora* tends to pick up biographical portraits of female characters because “the main target is viewers who can watch the 8:00 morning broadcast at home, namely housewives” (Saito et al., 2016). Focus on female heroines is supplemented by other womanly discourses in the themes of *asadora*, which revolve around familial, communal, and social problems that reflect contemporary Japan.

According to the same report, the prototype of the *asadora* heroine is the “woman who endures”—the kind of woman born in the early 20th century who went through the political, social, economic, and cultural ups and downs during World War II and its aftermath, including the occupation of Japan. *Oshin*, the titular character of the *asadora* mentioned above, is a prime example of this kind of heroine. From then, responding to the changing position of women in society, the heroine shifts into the “pioneering woman” model—the kind of woman who thrives in male-dominated occupations. Shirooka Asa of *Asa ga kita* (2015) is a recent example of this model of heroine, for she is portrayed as a woman who came of age during the Meiji Restoration era, and later established the first university for women in Japan. When women began to enter the workplace in larger numbers, becoming even more active in society and attaining a measure of gender equality, the heroine transforms into the figure of “career woman.” That figure then transforms into the “everyday woman,” who represents the daily life experiences of Japanese women in the modern era.

The heroine is one of the most important aspects of *asadora* and arguably what makes it popular. The character, nearly always a young woman, is portrayed within the context of her relationship with her family. The formula of the story is that the heroine must overcome some kind of hardship. For example, her family had often been visited by ill fortune. The heroine is also usually portrayed to have a particular dream that involves contributing to society in an untraditional way. The pursuit of the dream takes various forms, but essentially it involves a consideration of “what it means for a female to enter a male world” (Harvey, 1998, 136).

Because tradition is also important in *asadora*, choosing a traditional locale within which to place the heroine also becomes important. This highlights one of the main recurring themes in *asadora*, which is the struggle of a woman to overcome traditional restraints, in a sense to “rewrite tradition” (Harvey, 1998, 140), and to succeed in her chosen role. In the narrative pattern *jōkyō*, the heroine’s quest to succeed requires moving away from the traditional locale to a more modern sphere: the city. Harvey also attributes the popularity of *asadora* to this narrative pattern (1998, 143). As the term indicates, these dramas start in the provinces and finish in the capital.

The *jōkyō* pattern can be seen working in both the *asadora* chosen for analysis, *Hiyokko* and *Ama-chan*. Each drama involves a story about a young girl who has to move away from a rural, traditional landscape to the big capital of Tokyo. In general, both cases show that once the heroine is “displaced” to the big city, she is reminded of the charm and warmth of her hometown. By moving the protagonist away from her ideal hometown to the big city, the *asadora* can be seen as idealizing the hometown or *furusato*, especially relating to the ideas of family and community. In the big city, the heroine usually longs for similar kind of familial warmth she used to experience in her hometown. In some cases, the heroine builds her new community to fulfill this longing, but in other cases the heroine chooses to come back to where she originally came from.

The fact that this idealization of the hometown is especially visible through the heroine’s journey is probably related to the fact that the heroine as protagonist is seen as the one figure whose presence can trigger audience’s identification the most. The weight of choosing an *asadora* heroine can perhaps be likened to how the genre of *denki* manga (biographical manga) provides “a model with which the reader can identify and to which she can ultimately aspire” (Kawana, 2011, 202). It can be argued that an *asadora* heroine is cast with this function in mind, which is to establish a relationship between the audience and the screen personality. Andrew Tudor (1974, as cited in Dyer 1998, 18) proposed a typology of this relationship into four categories: emotional affinity, self-identification, imitation, and projection. In this regard, emotional affinity is the easiest to fulfill, for it is the most general and loose form of this relationship. *Asadora*’s strong day-to-day presence contributes significantly to the establishment of emotional affinity. The heroine becomes the familiar face that the audience sees every morning, like having the same guest visit you each day. In this way, making an emotional connection with the heroine is easy and seems natural. In some cases, the audience connection to the heroine can reach the level of imitation. For example, in the cultural phenomenon of *Ama-chan*, the heroine’s catchphrase spoken in the made-up local Iwate dialect (“*je je je*”) was mimicked so much by the audience that it became one of the “Words of the Year” of 2013.³

An *asadora* heroine must be able to represent the aspirations of everyday people, so it is important to make her relatable. This perhaps can be compared to the concept of the heroine in *shōjo* manga—another unique Japanese cultural product, who according to Oshiyama (2007, as cited in Kawana, 2011, 211), is designed to be appealing (*miriyokuteki*), which can mean “possessing certain ‘likeable’ qualities.” Oshiyama noted that one of the objectives of *shōjo* manga is to “create an attractive heroine with whom mainly teenage readers can identify.” Like *shōjo* manga heroines that are largely portrayed as young girls, one of the important factors in considering and determining the casting of an *asadora* heroine is the age of the actress. Heroines of *asadora* are often selected by auditioning actresses around the age of 20 years old.

There was once a tendency to cast unknown actresses for the lead roles, so that the *asadora* becomes the actress’ debut appearance on screen. According to NHK, this practice was done with the principle of making the *asadora* production a kind of apprenticeship for young actresses. Through this method, the audience would then not only follow the heroine’s journey and development, but also become invested in the actress’s growth as a personality. However, recently there have been instances where the *asadora* heroine role is given to well-established actress if she is still relatively young. One of the examples is the drama *Ohisama* (2011), which cast Inoue Mao as its heroine. At the point of casting, Inoue was already a well-established actress with a significant body of work and steady fan base, having started as a child actress in the late 90’s. When Arimura Kasumi was cast in *Hiyokko*, she was also considerably established as an actress. *Hiyokko* was not even her first *asadora* credit, for she also appeared in *Ama-chan*, playing the younger version of the heroine’s mother. Both cases show how actresses whose names are already well-known by the Japanese public for their numerous appearances in dramas, films, and commercials, are trusted to play the part of *asadora* heroine.

The recent trend of casting well-known young actresses as heroines seem to show a shift in NHK's preference when providing role models for society. No longer keen on making the *asadora* as an apprenticeship opportunity, NHK tends to choose young actresses with good reputation because she will also function as a kind of ambassador for the station. *Asadora* heroines are known to actively participate in NHK publicity events—sometimes they are even assigned the honor to host the year-end music festival, the *Kouhaku uta gassen*. Choosing well-known young actresses seem to be beneficial for NHK in its attempt to target the younger audience to tune in to the programs, likely in order to counter the public perception that the network is rather old-fashioned.

4. The cases of *Hiyokko* and *ama-chan*: the conventional and the twist

In the spring of 2017, NHK broadcast its 96th *asadora*, *Hiyokko*. With original screenplay by Okada Yoshikazu, *Hiyokko* is considered the quintessential *asadora* that practices the *jōkyō* pattern. The drama tells a story of Yatabe Mineko, a girl born and raised in Ibaraki Prefecture, who comes to Tokyo for employment during the postwar economic growth. The story began in 1964, the year of the first Tokyo Olympics, which serves as the great narrative of this drama. Harvey observed, in order for the story to progress, the heroine is usually portrayed as lacking something at the start of the drama. In the case of *Hiyokko*, what is missing is Mineko's father, Minoru, a migrant worker in Tokyo who disappeared. Mineko, who originally preferred to stay in her village in Ibaraki, was forced to work in Tokyo; not only for financial reasons, but also to try finding her missing father.

In the beginning of the story, Mineko idealized her life in the rural landscape of Oku-Ibaraki village. At the beginning of the series, there is a scene where Mineko and her family work together in the rice field for the harvest. The unglamorous, tough work of harvesting is portrayed as a seemingly fun, communal ritual. It paints a picture-perfect view of idealized rural life. What is interesting about the beginning of *Hiyokko*, though, is how the rural-urban relationship is already, little by little, suggested. The characters within the Ibaraki setting—in other words, the village people—often talk about Tokyo. Mineko's father Minoru, who has to go back to Tokyo to continue working as migrant worker, embodying an urban narrative arc. Even Mineko's two best friends, Tokiko and Mitsuo, are already set to move away from the village to seek employment in Tokyo—Tokiko dreams of being an actress, which is only possible if she moves to a bigger city, while Mitsuo is a third son of the family, which means that no land or means of earning a living is available to him, so he has to look for employment outside the house. This situation leads the heroine, Mineko, to develop an animosity toward Tokyo, because all the people she cares about go there, leaving her behind. Mineko makes this explicit when she says, “Why can't everyone just stay in Oku-Ibaraki?”

Mineko's dislike of the big city exists in contrast to her father's experience in Tokyo. Before Mineko goes through the *jōkyō* experience, her father went through it first. In a scene when Minoru was just about to go home to his village, he stops by a small restaurant in Akasaka, a district in Tokyo, specializing in Western-style Japanese food. The owners greet him and engage him in conversation, praising his work as migrant worker. At the end of this scene, the owners even prepared some *katsu* sandwiches for Minoru to bring home as a courtesy. In this scene, the owner Makino Suzuko remarked, “Please don't hate Tokyo.”

Mineko in *Hiyokko* is slightly different from the typical *asadora* heroine described by Harvey, for she did not carry a particularly untraditional dream. The main motivation of her moving to Tokyo was for work (in other words, to support her family), and to try finding her missing father. Moving to Tokyo did not serve as stepping stone to a better life, but rather as a choice that Mineko was forced to make. Nevertheless, *Hiyokko* does not necessarily portray Tokyo as antagonistic to its rural counterpart in the show. Upon moving to Tokyo Mineko finds work in a radio factory, and did in fact encounter some hardships of adjusting to her new life, but her journey always ends up in a new close-knit community that substitutes for the one she left at home. For example, during the time she worked in the radio factory, she forged a sisterhood with five other village girls who also went to Tokyo for work. Then, when the factory she worked for went bankrupt, Mineko ended up

finding work in the Akasaka restaurant that her father Minoru once visited, thus forming a new tight-knit community with the people around the area.

What *Hiyokko* eventually portrays through Mineko is the idea of how one moves away from one's hometown to the city and eventually re-discovers oneself in that city. In many respects, especially in its portrayals of the Ibaraki setting and Mineko's family background, *Hiyokko* establishes an ideal picture of the rural, traditional life that is full of warmth and closely related to the concept of family. Ibaraki becomes a place Mineko can always return to when she needs it. It is a place of nostalgia, precisely because Mineko finds herself a new life in Tokyo by working there. In other words, this drama can be seen as portraying the urban-rural relationship in a balanced manner. It seems to be saying that while the hometown is a good place that one could return to anytime, the city is not too bad either. In fact, the city can become the place where one starts a new chapter of one's life, replicating the warmth and connection of the hometown. This can be seen by how the story ends up with Mineko choosing to stay in Tokyo to continue working, for she has found herself a new community she wants to support, as well as an opportunity to build her own family.

If *Hiyokko* was the classic example of the *jōkyō* pattern, then *Ama-chan* is a slightly different case. *Ama-chan* is the 2013 spring-summer *asadora* that became a cultural sensation at the time, contributing to the renaissance of *asadora* popularity. It tells a coming-of-age-story about a girl named Aki, who at the beginning of the story moves from Tokyo to her mother's hometown in Iwate Prefecture. There, she has the ambition to become an *ama-san*—traditional female diver who dives to catch sea urchins, following the footsteps of her maternal grandmother. However, after gaining popularity as a local idol and eventually scouted by a talent agency from Tokyo, Aki decides to move back to Tokyo with the goal of becoming an idol. Eventually, she makes her way back to Iwate right after the disastrous 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami, which serves as the grand narrative that gives this drama its historical context.

In *Ama-chan*, instead of being displaced in the city, the heroine is actually displaced first in an unfamiliar locale that she would later claim as her hometown. At the beginning of the drama, Aki was shown in this unfamiliar environment slowly learning its customs, and even picking up the regional dialect. In some regards, the way *Ama-chan* unfolds in its first arc turns the *jōkyō* pattern upside down. Aki, who according to her mother, is a girl with no personality and does not stand out while in Tokyo, finds a new, more cheerful version of herself once she gets in touch with the rural landscape of the fictional Kita Sanriku, Iwate. Instead of a story of a village girl coming to the big town, *Ama-chan* is the complete opposite: it is a tale of a girl who could not adjust to the city, who eventually moves to the village and becomes happier.

Having said that, Aki's presence is balanced by another character, Adachi Yui, a village beauty who dreams of getting out of her hometown and becoming an idol. Yui's character is closer to a traditional *asadora* heroine, especially her aspiration to move to Tokyo. In other words, Yui becomes the antithesis of Aki. As the story progresses, Aki and Yui become best friends and enjoy considerable popularity as local singing stars. At one point, the two of them receive offers to come to Tokyo and sign up at a talent agency to join a newly developed group. In the end, Aki is the only one who makes it to Tokyo and thus goes through the *jōkyō* experience, because Yui has personal problems that prevent her from going. Back in Tokyo, Aki finds herself struggling as an aspiring idol, but she manages to prevail precisely because of the values she learned during the time she spent in her hometown—in the story, she gets a leading role in a film with a senior actress and former idol, Suzuka Hiromi. In a way, the Aki that moves to Tokyo to become an idol is not the same Aki who came from Tokyo to Iwate to become an *ama-san*. However, on the verge of success in Tokyo, Aki is compelled to come back to Iwate after the devastating 3/11 disaster hit her hometown.

Ama-chan is an especially interesting case, because it actually has many characters who want to move away from Iwate. However, most of them could not last long in Tokyo and eventually came

back to Iwate. Aki's mother, Haruko, stands out in this category. The opening scene of the series shows how an 18-year-old Haruko made the trip to Tokyo back in 1984, on the day of the Kita Tetsu railway opened. This local train itself becomes an important point of interest, because its existence suggests that urbanization is only possible when the rural and the urban have been connected by transportation—the train becomes a metaphor for modernization.

Haruko is an extreme case, because she did not return to her hometown until 24 years after she left, when she took her daughter Aki with her, thinking that her mother, Natsu, was in critical condition. Haruko's presence as probably the first person from Kita Sanriku who moved away to Tokyo is vital in the overall *Ama-chan* narrative. For the majority of the story, Haruko repeatedly emphasizes how she prefers the city to her hometown. This is a completely different sentiment compared to Aki's. Aki was actually born in Tokyo, but prefers the hometown she discovered as a young girl. Considering the way Aki and Haruko's views of the concept of hometown are portrayed, we can identify in *Ama-chan* a tendency to side with rural values. This drama seems to be saying that the hometown is definitely better, or perhaps, *the best*—wherever one goes, one will eventually come back. Haruko, who supposedly hates her hometown, eventually comes back, while Aki, originally a Tokyo-born girl, finds herself longing for the hometown that she adopted.

5. The making of *Furusato* in *Asadora*

Based on the analysis of the two *asadora* above, there are several points that can be drawn about the rural-urban values that are portrayed in the series. Both *Hiyokko* and *Ama-chan* portray the rural life as something ideal, warm, natural, and positive. The rural life is always related to the idea of family, both in the context of immediate family and extended family (community). The rural values also relate to a sense of nostalgia—something that the characters leave behind, but always long for. In *Hiyokko*, because the story starts with the heroine in her own hometown, rural life becomes her roots, something that shapes her character; even in the big city, her rural values remain, and eventually move her to return. Meanwhile, *Ama-chan* positions the heroine as the explorer who discovers the ideal rural life, and thus these rural values become something that she gains through learning and changing her behavior.

Urban life is also featured in both dramas. In *Hiyokko*, it is clear that within the setting of the story, urban life—represented by Tokyo—holds positive values since it stands for the idea of modernization. The city becomes a landscape in which the heroine finds the possibility for a better life; it is a place in which she can establish a new community. *Ama-chan*, on the other hand, portrays Tokyo as something a bit more complex. It is a place of hope for some (like Haruko and Yui), but it is also a suffocating and confusing place for others (like Aki). Tokyo also stands for the idea of modernization in this drama, but it is portrayed in a slightly less positive light. *Ama-chan* makes sporadic comments to the effect that modernization is killing the tradition that is being preserved in rural areas. Overall, *Ama-chan* tends to side with rural values as evidenced by the fact that all the characters eventually come back to the hometown.

Taking this perspective, *Hiyokko* can be considered to be promoting a kind of social conservatism that suggests the urbanizing movement of the modern era is a positive thing, but only insofar as society continues to hold the ideal values of community and mutual support. Thus, *Hiyokko* is a kind of optimistic view that even though Japanese society that is mostly urbanized right now, the people are able to hold onto their traditional values. However, *Ama-chan* is more critical toward the influence of city life. Judging by the historical context of its production that was significantly influenced by the March 2011 earthquake and tsunami disaster in the Tohoku area (usually referred to as “3/11”), *Ama-chan* is designed to be a callout for regional revitalization. However, the commentary made through *Ama-chan* is

not only bound to the context of the 3/11 disaster, but is also a reflection of the continuing depopulation of rural areas of Japan.

By considering the rural and urban values represented by these two *asadora*, we can examine further the meaning behind the idea of *furusato*. Both dramas involve a plot about leaving the hometown to move to the big city. This fits the concept that *furusato* refers to something that has been left behind by someone—a place from the past. Moreover, both dramas also portray the hometown as a place that the characters can always come back to, which fits the concept of *furusato* as not only a place in the past, but also a potential place in the future. Through the narrative pattern of *jōkyō* that the heroine goes through, the idea of *furusato* is thus achieved. Both dramas also suggest that *furusato* is not necessarily a birth town, but a place that symbolizes the home of the heart. Mineko's hometown will always be Oku-Ibaraki, not only because she was born there, but also because she is connected to the place through her family. However, a different reading could also point to the fact that perhaps Mineko, at the end of the story, ends up claiming Tokyo as her new “home”, because she decides to settle down there. Meanwhile, Aki wasn't even born in Iwate, but she has made it her hometown, because she is connected to the place through her family and community. Not only that, she also builds on an emotional connection with Iwate because only there she could truly be herself and pursue the things that she loves, such as diving and becoming an *ama-san*. In both cases, *furusato* becomes the portrait of an ideal home that is filled with human connection, despite the presence of modernization that threatens to disconnect us all.

In another perspective, both cases also show that within the *asadora* universe, the heroine is given a space to define their own *furusato*. It can be said that the existence of the *asadora* heroine points to a quite significant female representation on media. This becomes an important point to consider in the process of understanding the ideals of *furusato* that are communicated through this particular medium. It can be said that, whereas conventional attempts to construct the meaning of *furusato* in Japanese society tends to happen within a dominant male point of view, the *asadora*, in a way, challenges this notion through the existence of the heroine. In *asadora*, it is not the man who gets to imagine his hometown as an ideal place; it is the heroine. Both Mineko and Aki, for example, showcases that within the *asadora* universe, the heroine can claim her own *furusato*.

The process in which the heroine of an *asadora* defines or claims her own *furusato* also contributes to the development of the idea of *furusato* itself. This perhaps can be connected to the term “*furusato-zukuri*,” which is “a political process by which culture, as a collectively constructed and shared system of symbols, customs and beliefs, is socially reproduced” (Robertson, 1998, 494). If the process of *furusato-zukuri* in general is understood as something that promotes dominant patriarchal ideology, the making of the *furusato* within the *asadora* universe presents a kind of alternative. *Furusato-zukuri* through *asadora* is achieved by virtue of the trope of (re) discovery of the local, in which the countryside becomes “a projection space for an idealized Japanese lifestyle” (Scherer & Thelen, 2017, 6). This idealized lifestyle is particular, precisely because it is defined through a female perspective. In the *asadora* universe, the heroine negotiates with the dominant discourse and actually defines her own ideals in regard to the concept of the home.

Through *asadora*, regional identities and tastes remain strong, because of the influence of television that “strengthened rural identities and economies by broadcasting scenes from rural areas to a national audience” (Chun, 2007, 141). Having said that, it would be interesting to examine how the *jōkyō* process, while establishing the idea of *furusato*, can simultaneously reaffirm the capital city Tokyo as the center of Japan as a nation. In a way, the meaning of *furusato*, as understood by the heroine and by the audience, is constructed through the very existence of Tokyo as the cultural center of Japan. Solomon (2017) reminded that *furusato* tends to be treated as “an overdetermined symbol of nostalgia ... created by the discourse-

producing machines of the urban center.” The primary discourse-producing machine is of course, television, and as argued by Chun (2007, 122), the rural provinces of Japan are bound to the cities precisely through the power of television. Furthermore, television has played “a crucial role in exposing rural Japanese to urban trends and also helping to define the very meanings of ‘rural’ and ‘urban’” (2007, 123). Television connects rural viewers to urban life, and vice versa. The ideal rural *life*—the *furusato*—and modern cities enter viewers’ homes every day. This process helps to overcome the alienation between rural and urban and construct a society with unified values.

6. Conclusion

The narrative pattern *jōkyō*, as practiced in NHK’s *asadora*, reflects the social reality of the post-war modernization era in Japan, in which people from the rural areas move to the big cities for various reasons. In the context of *asadora*, the act of moving to the capital becomes an especially interesting case, because of *asadora*’s tradition in telling female-centered stories. The *asadora* heroine becomes a vehicle for the many people who watch *asadora* religiously to experience the life-changing transformation that takes place when one moves away from one’s hometown. By practicing the narrative pattern *jōkyō*, an *asadora* takes its time in portraying both rural life and urban life. These portrayals are an opportunity to contrast the two opposites by emphasizing their different values. As the cases of *Hiyokko* and *Ama-chan* show, rural life tends to be associated with the idea of family and community, while urban life is characterized by the idea of modernization, which can represent two opposing tendencies—it can be positive, meaning it stands for an advancement of an individual; or it can also be negative, suggesting the marginalization of tradition. In simple terms, the *jōkyō* narrative pattern is used to describe the relationship between the two (false) binaries.

Though understood as being diametrically opposite of each other, the two cases of *asadora* also show that rural and the urban values cannot be separated. They are interrelated, especially in the journey of the heroine. When the heroine goes through the *jōkyō* experience, the audience is exposed to how she perceives both rural and urban life. In some cases, the heroine is shown as preferring one to the other, as in *Ama-chan*, but in other cases, the two ways of life are portrayed in a balanced manner, as in *Hiyokko*. Whatever the case is, though, the relationship between rural and urban values represented in *asadora* is used to construct the idea of *furusato* as an ideal place that one comes from and to which one will eventually return.

Because the ideals of *furusato* represented and communicated through *asadora* are the ideals taken from the point of view of a woman, *asadora* can be viewed and considered as a certain vehicle for women to construct their own ideas of *furusato*. On the surface, this notion sounds very progressive. What we have here is a medium, which was created by depending on the female perspective, and for the female audience. However, we also have to be careful in considering the *asadora* heroine characteristic, for she has known to exhibit specific characteristics, such as possessing youth. By limiting the image of the *heroine* to a young girl, the producers also limit the female representation they are trying to champion. As progressive as it is, the female representation in *asadora* might not actually represent the complexity of the Japanese women’s point of view.

In the end, the *furusato* portrayed in *asadora* does not only mean *furusato* for the heroine, but also represents *furusato* for the audience who identify with her. Since the heroine is written as an ordinary figure, the audience can easily share her journey. Thus, the *asadora* audience—the Japanese people themselves—is encouraged to imagine their own *furusato*. In this regard, it could be argued that *furusato* represents Japan itself as a homeland for the people. In this way, *asadora* is one of the methods by which NHK disseminates and reinforces the traditional values of Japanese culture and communicates those values not only to the Japanese people themselves, but also to the world. In a way, NHK, as a public broadcaster that has the responsibility to support the national interest, employs productions like the *asadora* to support the government’s mission to achieve socio-cultural sustainability.

Funding

The author received no direct funding for this research.

Author details

Bawuk Respati¹

E-mail: respati.bawuk@gmail.com

ORCID ID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1142-0305>

¹ Faculty of film and Television, Jakarta Institute of the Arts, Jakarta, Indonesia.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Citation information

Cite this article as: Asadora heroine and the idealization of *Furusato*, Bawuk Respati, *Cogent Arts & Humanities* (2022), 9: 2088067.

Notes

1. Starting in 2020, the six days a week schedule consists of five main episodes from Monday to Friday and one weekly digest episod on Saturday.
2. The term “idol” in Japan refers to “highly produced and promoted singers, models, and media personalities” (Galbraith and Karlin 2012, 2). It is mostly associated with young performers who sing, pose for photographs, and appear frequently in the media.
3. The publisher Jiyu Kokumin Sha annually announces Japan’s “Words of the Year”. In 2013, the phrase “je je je” from Ama-chan was picked as one of the top ten words of the year. For further information, see: <https://www.nippon.com/en/features/m00012/>

References

- Chun, J. M. (2007). “A nation of a hundred million idiots?” a social history of Japanese television. Routledge.
- Davoudi, S., & Stead, D. (2002). Urban-rural relationships: An introduction and a brief history. *Built Environment*, 28(4), 267077. <https://doi.org/10.2307/23287748>
- Dyer, R. (1998). *Stars*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Galbraith, P. W., Karlin, J. G. (2012) Introduction: The Mirror of Idols and Celebrity Galbraith, P. W., Karlin, J. G. eds *Idols and Celebrity in Japanese Media Culture* (London: Palgrave Macmillan) https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137283788_1
- Harvey, P. A. S. (1998). Nonchan’s dream. In D. P. Martinez (Ed.), *The world of Japanese popular culture: gender, shifting boundaries and global cultures* (pp. 133–152). Cambridge University Press.
- Ivy, M. (1995). *Discourses of the vanishing: modernity, phantasm, Japan*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Jansson, A. (2013). The hegemony of the urban/rural divide: cultural transformations and mediatized moral geographies in Sweden. *Space and Culture*, 16(1), 88–193. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1206331212452816>
- Kawana, S. (2011). Romancing the role model: Florence Nightingale, Shōjo manga, and the literature of self-improvement. *Japan Review*, 23(1), 199–223 <http://doi.org/10.15055/00000200>.
- McQuail, D., De Mateo, R., & Tapper, H. (1992). a framework for the analysis of media changes in Europe in the 1990s. In K. Siune & W. Treutzschler (Eds.), *Dynamics of media politics* (p. 9). Sage .
- Morrison, L. R. (2013). Home of the heart: the modern origins of *Furusato*. *ICU Comparative Culture*, 45(2), 1–27 http://subsites.icu.ac.jp/org/sscc/pdf/morrison_45.pdf.
- Morrison, L. R. (2015). The *Furusato* as mother: gendered perspectives on the home in three Meiji and Taisho literary texts. *Gender and Sexuality: Journal of Center for Gender Studies ICU*, 10(1), 61–85 https://subsite.icu.ac.jp/cgs/docs/CGSjnl010_03_morrison.pdf.
- O’Sullivan, T., Hartley, J., Saunders, D., Montgomery, M., & Fiske, J. (2006). *Key concepts in communication and cultural studies*. Routledge.
- Ortiz-Moya, F., & Moreno, N. (2017). The incredible sinking Japan. *City*, 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13604813.2016.1239445>
- Oshiyama, M. (2007). *Shōko manga jendā hyōshōron: “Dansō no shōjo” no zōkei to aidentiti*. Sairyūsha.
- Robertson, J. (1998). It takes a village: internationalization and nostalgia in postwar Japan. In S. Vlastos (Ed.), *Mirror of modernity: invented traditions of modern Japan*. University of California Press.
- Rodriguez, J., & Fortier, T. (2007). *Cultural memory: resistance, faith & identity*. University of Texas Press.
- Saito, K., Nihei, W., Sekiguchi, S., & Mitsuya, K. (2016). *How people watched and perceived ama-chan, an NHK morning drama serial: examining the viewers’ passion and behaviour through four surveys*. NHK Broadcasting Culture Research Institute.
- Scherer, E., & Thelen, T. (2017). On countryside roads to national identity: Japanese morning drama series (asadora) and contents tourism. *Japan Forum*, 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09555803.2017.1411378>
- Solomon, J. L. 2017. *The Stink of the Earth: Reorienting Discourses of Tsugaru, Furusato, and Place*. PhD diss., University of Chicago.
- Tudor, A. (1974). *Image and Influence*. Allen and Unwin.
- Van den Bulck, H. (2001). Public service television and national identity as a project of modernity: The example of Flemish television. *Media, Culture & Society*, 23(1), 53–69. <https://doi.org/10.1177/016344301023001003>
- Yoshimi, S. (2005). Japanese television: early development and research. In J. Wasko (Ed.), *A companion to television* (pp. 540–557). Blackwell Publishing .



© 2022 The Author(s). This open access article is distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution (CC-BY) 4.0 license.

You are free to:

Share — copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format.

Adapt — remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially.

The licensor cannot revoke these freedoms as long as you follow the license terms.

Under the following terms:

Attribution — You must give appropriate credit, provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made.

You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use.

No additional restrictions

You may not apply legal terms or technological measures that legally restrict others from doing anything the license permits.



Cogent Arts & Humanities (ISSN: 2331-1983) is published by Cogent OA, part of Taylor & Francis Group.

Publishing with Cogent OA ensures:

- Immediate, universal access to your article on publication
- High visibility and discoverability via the Cogent OA website as well as Taylor & Francis Online
- Download and citation statistics for your article
- Rapid online publication
- Input from, and dialog with, expert editors and editorial boards
- Retention of full copyright of your article
- Guaranteed legacy preservation of your article
- Discounts and waivers for authors in developing regions

Submit your manuscript to a Cogent OA journal at www.CogentOA.com

