

26 Years Diary: Issue of Cultural Essentialism in “Multicultural” Japan

This is an extensively revised version of a paper I wrote in response to Junji Hanado’s controversial film titled *26 Years Diary* that came out in January 2007. Assuming that not many of us would have seen the film and considering the limitation of not having Power Point images, I believe it would be best to keep formal analyses of the film to the minimum, focusing instead on the outline and the contexts of my project. In my paper, I analyzed *26 Years Diary* as an exemplary case where the embracement of multiculturalism was subjected to serve as a solution to the impending issue of the shrinking Japanese population and the graying of the society. In 2005, Japanese population marked the first decline since census started in 1899, thus, highlighting the imminence of the issue.ⁱ Public concern has been fed by various doomsday scenarios such as the one claiming that Japan’s population would be cut in half within a century lest something is done to reverse the trend.ⁱⁱ In such a climate fraught with paranoia, various issues including the immigration debate and the push for a multicultural society are subjected to a reductive view that translates them into a single question; whether or not they provide a solution to the overarching depopulation issue. Popular culture plays a crucial role in this translation through its depiction of foreigners either as a solution to or the cause of what is increasingly becoming a national crisis. *26 Years Diary* provides an ideal case where a Korean student and Japanese-born Koreans are contrastingly represented respectively as a solution and a problem.

26 Years Diary is a semi-fictional biopic of Lee Su-hyon, a Korean student in Tokyo who was killed in a high profile accident on January 26, 2001 in which Lee and a Japanese photographer Shiro Sekine attempted in vain to rescue a drunken passenger Seiko Sakamoto who fell on the train track in

Shin-Okubo station.ⁱⁱⁱ The accident received wide media coverage and soon came to symbolize the hope for reconciliation between Japan and Korea. Just a year before the historic co-hosting of the FIFA World Cup in 2002, the accident conveniently created a martyr that symbolized unification of the two nations fraught with sensitive issues from the history of Japanese colonization of the Korean peninsula between 1910 and 1945 to the ongoing clash of territorial claims.^{iv} Not surprisingly, the then prime minister of Japan Yoshiro Mori and the then President of Korea Kim Daejung both made public speeches expressing remorse over the accident and praising the heroic act of the Korean student, but also framing the tragedy as a foundation for an improved future Japan-Korea relationship.^v

The message of overcoming the divide between Japan and Korea is ubiquitous in the film. One of the many fictional characters that Junji Hanado, the director of *26 Years Diary*, added to the story is a young Japanese singer called Yuri with whom Lee falls in love. The film, in fact, takes this fictional Romeo and Juliet-like romance as its central focus. The irrational and racist refection of Lee by Yuri's father, Hirata, sets another stage for Lee to perform the overcoming. Also prevalent is the image of Lee as a solution to conflicts in familial and other social relationship among the Japanese characters. It is no coincidence that Lee meets Yuri as he fends off a couple of gangsters who Yuri's concert. To Yuri, Su-hyon persistently preaches the importance of bringing her dysfunctional family back together and eventually manages to get her parents to come together at their daughter's concert even though Lee does not live to witness the fruit of his efforts.

Lee's insistence on the importance of family integrity is contextualized in the film by the depiction of his family in Pusan, South Korea. The opening twenty minutes of the film shows Lee's life in Korea that is characterized by a strict adherence to the Confucian respect for the patriarchal order. In the opening scene, we witness Lee's sister cleaning Lee's bike expecting his return from the compulsory

military service. As he returns, he performs a formal “reporting back” to his father and to the altar in the house dedicated to his ancestors. The family members are often framed together and in the containment of their modern apartment house. The scenes in Korea form a stark contrast with the ensuing scenes in Japan where Lee witnesses disintegrated families, disillusioned youths, and the absence of traditional values. Yuri is often seen fighting with her father in direct defiance of the Confucian ideal. The total absence of Yuri’s house – the closest it gets is Hirata’s bar where Yuri’s band practices – heightens the contrast between the images of Korea and Japan. The exotic depiction of Korea as a place where tradition is still kept has a larger implication than a former colonial master’s patronizing fantasy about its former colony.

Needless to say, Lee’s relationship with Yuri is itself deeply imbedded in the discourse of depopulation. As Yuri’s best friend points out, the rebellious and tomboyish Yuri grows more feminine through her relationship with Lee. The association of romance with counter-depopulation policies is not as far-fetched as it might appear. In her anthropological study of love in Japan, Sonia Ryang lists initiatives taken by both local and central governments in order to promote marriage and childbearing among young people as part of the counter-depopulation effort. These range from a booklet with 119 marriage proposal lines published by the Nara prefectural government to the central government’s 100,000 yen subsidies offered to married couples undergoing infertility treatment.^{vi} Ryang writes:

Given the situation that the Japanese government faces, it may not be surprising that various aspects of the lifestyle of the population have become subject to both overt and covert scrutiny of all levels of the national state. And love stands at the forefront of this operation.^{vii}

But why must we be critical about a “positive” representation of Lee Su-hyon as a solution to the population crisis in Japan? Subjecting the embracement of multiculturalism to an ulterior condition comes with great risks. A similar concern is raised by the sociologist Manabu Akagawa albeit in relation to the

debate on gender equality rather than multiculturalism. Akagawa points out that scholarly, political, and popular discourse has, since the mid-1990s, associated high female employment rate with high birthrate through dubious use of statistics to support the claim. Akagawa takes up the task of reviewing and questioning the statistics used to back up this association, but what he is critiquing is, in fact, the current situation where all kinds of issues and policies are judged in terms of their efficacy in countering the dropping birthrate and the graying of the society. Akagawa is careful to stress that he is not against making the society more hospitable for working women. His argument, on the contrary, is that policies to tackle disadvantages faced by working women must be implemented regardless of its effect on the birthrate, or even if it resulted in further drop in the birthrate.^{viii} Similarly, the issue of making Japanese society more tolerant to differences should not be conditioned by its effects on the population crisis, but judged on its own merit.

Subjecting multiculturalism to the issue of population crisis and rendering foreigners as either solutions to or constituents of it creates a division between the host society and the other subjects that is perpetuated by cultural essentialist notions. The former Tokyo Immigration Bureau director and an outspoken critic of future immigration policies, Hidenori Sakanaka provides a case in point. For Sakanaka, who is among the early advocates for the need for a culturally and ethnically diverse society, multiculturalism is only conceivable in terms of the host and the guest: the Japanese host society accepting the non-Japanese guests. It is not surprising, therefore, that he considers firm ethnic pride as a precondition for a good relationship between the host and guest. He states, in a factual tone, that those who are not proud in their own ethnicity and culture cannot be tolerant of different ethnicities or cultures, or expect to be respected by people from different cultures.^{ix} This division is reminiscent of the limits of multiculturalism that Homi Bhabha points out. The “entertainment and encouragement of cultural diversity” is, according to Bhabha, always coupled with a “corresponding containment of it.” The division

between the host society and the other subjects must be maintained by the creation of “a transparent norm” by the host society which says “these other cultures are fine, but we must be able to locate them within our own grid.”^x

For Sakanaka, the two primary challenges Japan faces in its pursuit to build a multicultural society are, first, the negative images of foreigners – as propagated by the presence of workers overstaying their visas – and, second, the presence of subjects who lack a fixed affiliation with a single cultural “roots.” The solutions to both challenges take the form of screening the foreigners. For the former threat, Sakanaka stresses the need for a tougher control at the port and on street level. As the head of the Tokyo Immigration Bureau, he put his idea into practice by waging campaigns to round up illegal workers in Kabukicho, Tokyo’s red-light district.^{xi} With regards to the latter challenge, the division between the “good” and the “bad” foreigners is not drawn along the legal line. What must be screened out in this case are those who inhabit the gray area between cultures and ethnicities since their presence jeopardizes the a priori foundation of multiculturalism, that is, the division between the host and the guest.

It is no coincidence that Sakanaka considers the old-comer Koreans, or Zainichi Koreans, a group of mostly Japanese-born Koreans that originates from the Japanese colonization of Korea, as an ideal test case to assess Japan’s progress in building a multicultural society.^{xii} The roughly 600,000 Zainichi Koreans who live without Japanese passport under the Japanese *jus sanguinis* nationality law have been a difficult group to be contained by what Bhabha calls the grid of the host society.^{xiii} As the social scientist David Chapman points out, Zainichi Korean presence “has been seen as a ‘problem’ for most of the postwar period. In a society that came to embrace what the sociologist Eiji Oguma calls the ‘the myth of the homogeneous nation’—partly in reaction against the imperial past that forcefully assimilated Koreans

and Taiwanese as well as other South East Asian and Pacific nationals as imperial subjects—Zainichi Koreans were considered as a dangerous remainder that disrupts the myth.”^{xiv} Now that Japan attempts to move away from the mythical homogeneity to embrace multicultural coexistence, Zainichi Koreans ironically remains a threat as the primary inhabitants of the gray zone between the host society and the guests. In an effort to contain the threat of the multiple and fluid identity of the Zainichi Koreans that falls out of the grid of cultural diversity, Sakanaka encourages them to abandon the ambiguous and ambivalent position between Japan and Korea and fully identify themselves as Japanese subjects of Korean descent. This is a call for Zainichi Koreans to “come out” from the closet by dropping their Japanese pseudonyms that many of them have traditionally used and embracing their ethnic roots so that they can become the first instance of the “new type of Japanese.”^{xv}

26 Years Diary provides a visual form to this process of pacifying the threatening potential of Zainichi Koreans for multicultural Japan. Hanado does this through contrasting the images of a Zainichi Korean in a “closet” and Zainichi Koreans who came out. My paper elaborated a reading of Yuri’s father, Hirata – the most mysterious and confusing character in the film – as a Zainichi Korean in a “closet.” There are sufficient cues to back up this reading from his and his separated wife’s workplace - the music industry and Pachinko industry – that have traditionally been niche industries for Zainichi Koreans to his fluency in Korean which he only reveals towards the end of the film.^{xvi} This speculation cannot be verified within the film, but what is important for the purpose of my argument is that Hirata lacks a firm sense of ethnic identity that he can proudly represent in a multicultural society. He not only conceals his ability to talk in Korean, but is ashamed of his affiliation with Korea. Contrary to what we might expect from a fervent anti-Korean racist, Hirata is not a Japanese nationalist. Instead, he wears a Rolling Stones T-shirt, hangs Sinatra’s record on the wall of his bar, and relies on Californian investors to expand his music business. Notwithstanding his flirtation with foreign investment, however, his bar goes bankrupt. It

is at this moment – in the empty bar after all the instruments and equipments are seized – that Hirata talks to Lee in Korean, thus, marking the end of his existence in the gray zone between cultures.

As if to counter-balance the representation of Hirata’s confusing character, the film presents a much more candid or “outed” image of Zainichi Koreans when Yuri and Lee encounters a Zainichi family in Ikuno ward of Osaka. Ikuno ward, with the largest concentration of Zainichi Koreans in Japan, sets an appropriate stage to represent the “outed” Zainichi Koreans since it has branded itself as a “Korea town” that promotes mutual understanding between its residents and the mainstream Japanese visitors.^{xvii} Outside the family house, the camera shows a close up of a doorplate with two versions of the same name; a Korean name and a Japanese name, the former the legally registered name and the latter a Japanese alias.^{xviii} The strong Korean accent of the old woman with whom Lee converses and the characteristically Korean items that fill her room from dried chili peppers to an ancestral alter make her and her family readily recognizable as Korean. She exhibits a sense of pride when she talks about the difficult postwar days that she spent collecting scrap metal without rest and about sending all her children to university. She completes her self-articulation as a new Japanese national by foreclosing her allegiance to Korea. She bitterly tells how she found no place in Korea when she visited there for the first time after saving up for the trip for 40 years.

26 Years Diary highlights the role mainstream films play not only in envisioning the future of Japan as it enters the period of population decline, but also in producing subjectivities that are ideal for the future society; those who belong to the “host society” and those who can only coexist within the dominant culture’s grid. While the shift away from the myth of the homogeneous nation allows for opportunities to challenge the divide between the host and the guest, the sort of multiculturalism that Sakanaka and the film *26 Years Diary* propagates dangerously reproduces the same cultural essentialism

that has informed and perpetuated the homogeneity myth in Japan. In an innocent effort to narrate a story about a respectable young Korean man, the film *26 Years Diary* unwittingly creates a dogmatic norms to which foreigners are subjected even as Japan makes a historic move away from the myth of homogeneity to the newly embraced multiculturalism.

ⁱ The Keidanren Vision 2007: “Kibo no Kuni, Nihon” January 1, 2007, 8.

ⁱⁱ David Blake Willis and Stephen Murphy-Shigematsu, *Transnational Japan: At the Borderlands of Race, Gender and Identity* [London;New York: Routledge, 2008] 6.

ⁱⁱⁱ The accident resulted in the death of all three. For a more detailed account on the accident, see

^{iv} Hanado mentions the clash of territorial claims over the island known as Dokdo in Korean and Takeshima in Japanese as the condition that made him accept an offer to shoot Lee’s story in 2003. See Madoka Takenouchi “Hanaoka Junji Kantoku Intabyu” *Kinema Junpo* 1475, [January 2007] 60. See Tokuko Hashimoto “Hero Korean Moves Japan” in *The Independent*, [March 4, 2001] for the reception of the accident.

^v Hi Bon Kan, *Anata wo Wasurenai: Kankokujin Ryugakusei Lee Su Hyon Oboegaki*, [Tokyo: Waseda Shuppan, 2001] 92 and “Funeral Rites Held for Men Killed in Failed Station Rescue” *The Japan Times*, [January 30, 2001].

^{vi} Sonia Ryang, *Love in Modern Japan: It’s Estrangement from Self, Sex, and Society* [New York: Routledge, 2006], 123.

^{vii} Ryang 2006, 122.

^{viii} Manabu Akagawa, *Kodomo ga Hette Nani ga Waruika!* [Tokyo: Chikumashobo, 2004], 9, 92, 102.

^{ix} My translation. Sakanaka uses *minzoku* (ethnicity) and *bunka* (culture) incoherently and regards Japanese as a static, a priori category that his warning addresses. Hidenori Sakanaka. *Gaikokujin Ni Yume o Ataeru Shakai o Tsukuru: Shukushoshite Yuku Nihon no Gaikokujin Seisaku*. [Saitama: Nihon Kyohosha, 2004] 40.

^x Homi Bhabha, "The Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha," in Jonathan Rutherford, *Identity: Community, Culture, Differences* [London: Lawrence and Wishart] 208.

^{xi} Hidenori Sakanaka. *Nyukan Senki: "Zainichi" Sabetsu, "Nikkeijijn" Mondai, Gaikokujin Hanzai to Nihon no Kin-Mirai*. [Tokyo: Kodansha, 2005] , 14-29.

^{xii} Sakanaka 2005, 140, 144.

^{xiii} Yasunori Fukuoka has a higher estimate that an approximate 1% of the 120 million people in Japan are either North or South Korean nationals or Japanese nationals of Korean descent (naturalized Zainichi Koreans). See Yasunori Fukuoka, "Koreans in Japan: Past and Present," (translated by A-Kwi Seo et al.) *Saitama University Review* 31. [No. 1, 1996] <http://www.han.org/a/fukuoka96a.html> (accessed May 8, 2008)

^{xiv} See Eiji Oguma. *A Genealogy of "Japanese" Self-Images*, translated by David Askew, [Melbourne: Trans Pacific Press, 2002] xxviii-xxx. Koichi Iwabuchi, for instance, argues that Zainichi Koreans have existed as the internal remainder of the Japanese imperial past to a greater extent than Koreans in South or North Korea who have traditionally been vocal about criticizing Japanese imperial past. See Iwabuchi 127.

^{xv} Sakanaka 2005, 140.

^{xvi} Hirata's wife works at a child-care center attached to a pachinko parlor most likely to look after the children while their guardians play pachinko. The complicated relationship between pachinko businesses and Zainichi Korean politics surfaced as the negotiation in six-party talks on North Korea's nuclear program stalled. Many Zainichi Korean families have relatives in North Korea as a result of a repatriation program sanctioned by both the Japanese and North Korean governments that took place mostly in the 1960s and 1970s and which has compelled them to remit large sums of money to North Korea every year. Pachinko generates \$256 billion gross revenue annually, and is considered the primary source of \$200 million remitted to North Korea annually. See Charles Wolf Jr., "Tokyo's Leverage Over Pyongyang" in *Japan Times*, [November 21, 2006].

^{xvii} See Chanyu Ko. *Koriataun ni Ikiru: Hon Yopyo Raifuhsutorii*, [Osaka: Entitleshuppan, 2007] 2-3, 152-153. Ko notes that the number of visitors to Korea town boomed since the co-hosing of the FIFA World Cup in 2002. He

describes Korea town as the symbol of the age of *Tabunka Kyosei* for its efforts to use the thriving Korean culture as a means to facilitate mutual understanding between its residents and the Japanese people.

^{xviii} The aliases are not simply pseudonyms, but have limited legal recognition. While aliases are not accepted for passports, driving licenses, and certificates of competence to practice medicine, nursing, etc., they are accepted for school registration, employment, and in commercial transactions. Like the legal “ethnic” names, they are passed on through the generations and the forenames are given by parents rather than chosen by individuals themselves. Aliases can be printed on the alien registration form along-side the legal name. See Yasunori Fukuoka, "Koreans in Japan: Past and Present," translated by A-Kwi Seo et al., in *Saitama University Review*, (31. 1, 1996) <http://www.han.org/a/fukuoka96a.html> (accessed May 8, 2008)