

From Fukuzawa Yukichi to Yon-sama:
The Nostalgic Image of Korea in Modern and Contemporary Japan

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Nostalgia

The Japanese are nostalgic people. The word *natsukashii* (good old, nostalgic), which expresses feelings of nostalgia for things from the past, is one of the most intensively used adjectives in the Japanese language. *Natsukashii kokyō* means “the dear old home,” *natsukashii uta* “an old favorite song“ and *natsukashii tomodachi* “a dear old friend.” There is even a popular musical genre, the *enka*, which is almost entirely dedicated to nostalgia, particularly for the *furusato* (hometown) and a longing to return to it. It almost goes without saying that this nostalgia, like every nostalgia, is not so much a longing for a real experience, but nostalgia for an imagined past (Clae). As Lord Byron said, "The ‘good old times’ -- all times when old are good."

Nostalgia has been a central part of the Japanese culture since ancient times. Every Japanese person can quote by heart this 8th century poem by Ono no Oyu, the Assistant Governor-General (*daini*) of the Imperial Government Office (*dazaifu*) in Kyūshū, longing for his past life at the

imperial capital. "*Aoniyoshi Nara no miyako wa saku hana no niou ga gotoku ima sakarinari*," "As flowers in bloom glow in beauty and fragrance, the capital at Nara is now at the height of its splendor."

Nowadays, Japanese nostalgia is alive and well, is an integral part of popular culture (Lee 186-203), and is also at work with respect to other Asian countries. Koichi Iwabuchi has shown how "consumption of Hong Kong popular culture by Japanese audiences tends to be informed by nostalgic longing" (Iwabuchi 548), while Dorinne Kondo chose to focus on the nostalgia component of Japanese tourism in Bali and Thailand (Kondo).

Koichi Iwabuchi brings even more examples of this nostalgic yearning. In the TV drama *Doku*, broadcast in 1996, Vietnam's modernizing vigor "is both Japan's vanishing present and its desired future" (Iwabuchi 553). The same power and energy of Chinese immigrants to Japan can be seen in *Swallowtail*, a 1996 movie by Iwai Shunji. "The film," writes Koichi Iwabuchi, "(...) projects its nostalgia toward the (imagined) past when Japan was still 'Asia,' when Japan was displaying 'Asian' vigor" (Iwabuchi 554). "What is mourned, through the predicated destiny of premodern Asia, is what Japan itself supposedly has lost or is about to lose" (Iwabuchi 549).

Yon-sama

The same nostalgic view is at work with regard to Korea. This was the case in the past, particularly in the Meiji period, as will be shown below. This is also the case today, as can be seen in the Korean wave (*kanryū* [jap.], *hallyu* [kor.]), which has become popular in Japan in recent years. Korean entertainment, particularly Korean TV dramas, reminds middle-

aged Japanese (especially women) of the good old days, which have vanished.

Maybe the best-studied example of this nostalgic attitude is the main masculine character of the drama *Winter Sonata*, Bae Yong-joon (BYJ), or as he is familiarly called in Japan, *Yon-sama*. According to Sun Jung, a young Korean scholar from Melbourne University, the middle-aged feminine fans of Yon-sama "desire BYJ in ways that can be considered 'retrospective' and 'nostalgic'" (Jung 3). "BYJ became a star in Japan because of his polite and feminine image which exemplifies the Japanese viewers' longings and desires towards old virtues, which they believe they once had, but now have been lost" (Jung 7). These values are believed to still exist in Korea, which therefore is, for Japanese audiences, "still the 'past' and pre-modern" (Jung 8).

Sun Jung also quotes Shin Kyung-mi (Jung 7), who argues that the Yon-sama "syndrome" is a yearning for the "good days" of the post-war economic growth. If Shin is right, this would mean that the popularity of BYJ, and of the Korean wave in general, has to be understood in a broader frame, that of nostalgia for "the lost values of Shōwa" (1926-1989), or more precisely of late Shōwa, of the 1960s and 1970s, recently evoked by Hans Brinckmann in a conference in London (Brinckmann).

Let us also note that this nostalgic side of the Korean wave is also widely covered in the media and on the internet (anyend; BBC; Endo and Matsumoto; Yasuyuki; Yukie). The *New York Times* wrapped up the point beautifully in this short sentence: "Yon-sama seems to touch upon the Japanese nostalgia for an imagined past" (Onishi).

Tayama Masanaka

Korea is the incarnation of an imagined past. It is fascinating to see that this was also the case during the Meiji period (1868-1912). A similar nostalgic image of Korea then existed in Japan and was used for multiple purposes. Korea was viewed as the incarnation of a past Japan, before Westerners arrived and modernization began. In such a view, Korea became the reflection of a lost paradise, and symbolized aspirations to or regrets about an extinct past. Korea turned into some kind of a magic mirror in which Japan watched the reflection of its own past.

The nostalgic image of Korea was used in different contexts. For instance, it is interesting to note how Korea appeared in the thoughts of quite an unknown figure, a man called Tayama Masanaka (Nakatsuka 40-45).

The only thing Tayama Masanaka left behind is an essay, included in a collection of texts about Korea, published in 1875 by Sada Hakubō, himself a diplomat who was at the time in charge of Korean affairs. The collection of eight essays edited by Sada was called “Comments Concerning the Subjugation of Korea” (“Seikan hyōron”). Six of the pieces supported a hard-line policy towards Korea, while two of them opposed such a policy and called for a different approach to the Korean issue. The essay written by Tayama was one of those two moderate pieces.

In his essay, Tayama Masanaka tried to refute the arguments of those in favor of “subjugating Korea” (*seikanron*). To turn the energies of the warriors towards Korea would be to repeat the mistakes of Hideyoshi, he said. To conquer Korea would not be easy, and would not be of any benefit to Japan in facing Russia; in fact, an attack on Korea would only increase the number of Japan’s enemies. Moreover, to assail a peaceful

and weak country while you are not able to confront your real enemy, i.e. the Western powers, would only be a sign of cowardice.

And here lay the heart of the matter, the nostalgic image of Korea. For Tayama, Japan's real enemies were the Western powers, which opened her and imposed upon her their so-called "civilization," leading to the core of Tayama's argument: he challenged the idea that Japan must bring to its neighbor the false virtues of the faked Western civilization. There are no virtues here, said Tayama. Japan, by opening itself, only fell at the mercy of the West. The Western powers were exploiting its wealth and bringing it to unavoidable decline. How could Japan genuinely recommend to Korea to follow the same erroneous path? How could Japan ask Korea to give up her beautiful traditional civilization, which was based on the values of faithfulness and justice? Korea, he added, was like a virtuous and attractive woman who remained indifferent to the immoral appeals coming to her from strangers.

It is quite clear from the above that Tayama was more interested in Japan than in Korea, and that he was using Korea to talk about Japan. Even his final praise of Korean civilization was the reflection of a reactionary aspiration to a lost past. Tayama was opposed to the opening of his country, and he regretted that decision, which he thought had been an error beyond repair, and he was trying to find in Korea the engulfed traditional purity of his own country. Tayama's idealization of Korea was an anti-Restoration stance.

Tayama was looking after a lost and regretted Japanese past, of which Korea was the reflection. Korea seemed like an echo of Japan before it opened to the world. Japan had no right to pull Korea along the same wrong road she had senselessly taken. The image of Korea Tayama was drawing was deeply reactionary, lacking any future. This was a volatile

and ephemeral image, drawn straight from, and anchored to, the past. This was a desperate nostalgic appeal to the past.

Fukuzawa Yukichi

To say that this nostalgic image had no future does not mean that it disappeared. On the contrary, it continued to prosper, but the use people made of it would change. The obscure Tayama Masanaka pressed for a policy of noninvolvement in the peninsula. The famous Fukuzawa Yukichi ground his aspirations to reform Korea, among other things, in a similar nostalgic sympathy, awakened in his heart by the young Korean reformers.

The contacts between Fukuzawa Yukichi and the Korean reformers at the beginning of the 1880s are well-known. Fukuzawa welcomed some students to the Keiō Institute, and became especially enthusiastic about one of the reformer leaders, Kim Ok-kyun. Fukuzawa and the Korean reformers believed that Korea should become a fully independent country, and that reforms should be carried on.

Fukuzawa Yukichi explained his stand using an allegory about two bordering houses, one made of stone and the other of wood. If the owner of the stone house wishes to fully protect his dwelling from a possible fire, he has to persuade his neighbor to build his house of stone as well. Otherwise, a fire that would erupt in the wooden house might spread and endanger also the habitation of the adjacent stone house (Jiji shinpō 9/11/1882, Kinefuchi 69-71).

What Fukuzawa Yukichi was exposing here was the strategic vision of Korea; a stable and modern Korea was a vital component of Japan's security. However, Fukuzawa was not content with this pragmatic argumentation. In a letter from the same period, he disclosed a less-known

side of his approach to Korea, a sentimental and nostalgic approach. Here are a few lines from this letter:

“At the beginning of this month, some Koreans came to Japan in order to observe the conditions in our country, and two young men among them were admitted to our institute; I had them settled in my place, and I will apply myself to guide them gently. Truly, when I remember how I was more than twenty years ago, I cannot stop feeling sympathy and compassion for them. (...) When Koreans, elevated or humble, come and visit me, and when I am listening to them, it is the Japan of thirty years ago which reappears in front of my eyes” (Fukuzawa Yukichi, Koizumi Nobukichi-ate shokan. Kamigaito 7).

Fukuzawa was altogether sentimental and pragmatic, idealistic and realistic. There was no contradiction. These young and enthusiastic Koreans reminded him of his youth, and he wished to guide them “gently” (*yasashiku*), a rare word in his vocabulary (Kamigaito 7). Why? Because today’s Korea was the Japan of the past, the Japan of 30 years ago, the Japan on the eve of the opening of the country, the Japan before the Restoration and before the great reforms.

From this approach emerges another aspect of Fukuzawa’s view of Korea. Beyond the national egoism symbolized by the parable of the two houses, Fukuzawa seems to respect Korea, or at least, he seems to understand that Korea should not be urged to act against her will. When he sent two of his disciples to the neighboring peninsula as advisors for the founding of the first Korean paper, the “Hansŏng sunbo”, he asked them to be careful not to destroy the local customs, but only to dedicate

themselves to the transmission of Western knowledge (Jiji shinpō 1/11-13/1883, Takasaki 14-15) (Harada).

The will to guide Korea on the path of civilization had its origins in the above mixture of realistic and idealistic sentiments. On the one hand, one wanted to stabilize Korea for Japan's security. On the other hand, one viewed the neighboring country as a kind of Japan of the past. Korea was altogether a shadow of the past, and an object ripe for civilization.

The practical consequence of this dual approach would be the moral and material support Fukuzawa would grant and try to obtain for the Korean reformers. When these same reformers failed to fulfill his expectations after the fiasco of the 1884 coup d'état, Fukuzawa would again ground his disappointment, his call "to escape from Asia" (*datsuaron*), in an inverted nostalgic image: Korea, as irremediably Japan of the past (Jiji shinpō 3/16/1885).

By accepting the premises of Western civilization, Japan, Fukuzawa then argued, had acquired the right to lead the East on the path of civilization. However, if its Oriental partners, especially Korea, refused to go along with her, Japan had the right to sneak away from them, to abandon them to their fate, and to consider them as Westerners would. If Korea wished to remain Japan of the past, she was free to do so, but in that case, Japan of the present would not care for her anymore. This was a crucial juncture: instead of nostalgic feelings, the image of Korea as Japan awakened only irritated sentiments.

Tarui Tōkichi

This was not the case for everyone. Images do not disappear or change meaning in one day. Even though Fukuzawa Yukichi altered his position

after 1885 and took an irritated attitude towards Korea, the nostalgic image continued to exist. It persisted, for instance, with Tarui Tōkichi, one of the precursors of the Asianist doctrine. Starting from a similar view of Korea as a backward country, Tarui Tōkichi reached a far-reaching conclusion, opposite to that of Fukuzawa: Japan and Korea had no choice but to form one federated country.

Tarui's ideas were written down in 1885 as an answer to Fukuzawa's *Datsuaron*, but they were not published until 1890. In 1910, Tarui's book, "Daitō gappōron" or "The Great Orient Federation," would be used as a justification of the annexation of Korea, and Tarui himself would support this annexation. These facts obscured the real meaning of the text at the time of its publication (Sakurai 1-27) (Han; Suzuki).

Korea is a backward country, stated Tarui in 1885, but backwardness is only the result of human behavior, not an intrinsic and unchanging characteristic. Many of the poor countries became rich, and many of the weak countries became strong. To conclude what the future will be by merely watching the present situation would be a serious mistake. Tarui does not state directly that Korea is Japan of the past, but there is little doubt that it is Japan which is in his mind when he refers to poor and weak countries that became rich and strong.

Yamaji Aizan

More traces of the nostalgic view could be found, and not only in Tarui's writings. But as time passed and as Japan moved away from her own past, this vision of Korea as Japan of the past would turn into a more and more negative blend. The notion that Korea was Japan of the past would not be denied; on the contrary, Korea would even become Japan of a very remote past, but the conclusions would be radically different, along the lines of

Fukuzawa's in 1885. The travel diary of Yamaji Aizan and the economic theories of Fukuda Tokuzō exemplify this point.

Yamaji Aizan was a liberal intellectual who became a Christian. In 1904, Aizan travelled to Korea while keeping a diary where he wrote down his impressions. The open markets he saw in Pusan reminded him of the markets of the Niigata region, the only difference being the filth. The women peddlers with baskets on their heads were like the women from Ohara, a village near Kyōto, who came down to the imperial capital to sell wood and wooden objects. The men carrying heavy loads on their backs were like the peasants around Kyōto, and those driving small carts with long objects on them were similar to the men one could see on Sanjō bridge in Kyōto. In all, the Pusan human scenery, with its nonchalant pace indifferent to time, reminded him of the Kyōto people, i.e. of traditional Japan. Aizan summed up his feelings with these words: “The Koreans who appear under my eyes seem to come out directly from the Nara period. My feeling is that their life is similar to the life of Nara without the spirit, and that Nara's life was like the Koreans' life, with the spirit in addition” (Yamaji Aizan, “Kanzan kikō”. Yamada and Takasaki 79-80).

All this was written after he spent only half a day in Pusan. When Yamaji Aizan arrived in Korea, he already knew what his opinion of the country would be. He already possessed a frame of interpretation into which he would insert observations and rumors.

Fukuda Tokuzō

One of the people who would build such a frame of interpretation and theorize the image of Korea as Japan of the past was Fukuda Tokuzō (Hatada; Kang). Fukuda Tokuzō is regarded as one of the founders of modern Japanese economics. In his Ph.D. dissertation written in Germany

in 1900, he maintained that Japan and the West had gone through a similar economic development, the main characteristic of which was the existence of a feudal stage, which was the condition required for the emergence of a modern economy.

Back in Japan, Fukuda tried to strengthen his assumption by studying Korean economic development. He traveled to Korea in 1903, and immediately upon his return to Japan, he began publishing a series of articles entitled “Economic Organization and Economic Units in Korea” (“Kankoku no keizai soshiki to keizai tan’i”). The theory articulated in this book is generally known as *teitairon*, “the theory of stagnation.”

In line with his thesis, Fukuda Tokuzō explained Korea’s backwardness by the absence in her historical development of a feudal stage. Therefore, contemporary Korea corresponded to Japan of the Fujiwara period (end of 9th century - end of 12th century). Korea was still “stagnating” at a prefeudal stage, and because of the burden of tradition, Korea was unable to enter a process of autonomous development. Fukuda’s conclusion was that it was the role of Japan to help Korea, because Japan had passed through a feudal stage. Because of her own history, it was Japan’s duty to develop Korea, to make Korea similar to herself and to assimilate Korea to herself.

This theory would play an important role later, after the annexation, but Fukuda Tokuzō does not only represent the seed of that future; he is also the outcome of the past. Korea as Japan of the Fujiwara—was Yamaji Aizan saying anything else? Fukuda Tokuzō gave a theoretical background to ideas that had been circulating since the 1870s. Moreover, Fukuda accomplished a synthesis between *datsuaron* and interventionism. The fact that Japan did not belong to her geographical environment helped explain why Korea was Japan of the past, and why it was Japan’s duty to

civilize her. Because Korea was Japan of the past, Korea could and should be civilized by Japan of the present.

By despising their “primitive” Korean neighbor, the Japanese expressed the rejection of their own past and also the confidence that their own accomplishments might as well become, tomorrow, Korea’s achievements.

A Discourse on Japan

The nostalgic image of Korea is related to another fundamental component of the perception of Korea in the Meiji period: the imaginary dimension of the neighboring peninsula. Very often, there were two Koreas in the Japanese minds: Korea as it was and Korea as it was dreamed. Korea was often shrouded in a layer of unreality. Already in the Edo period, when thinkers like Hayashi Shihei, Satō Nobuhiro, Yoshida Shōin and others developed aggressive theories about Korea, they did not refer to any real Korea, but to an imaginary one. Korea was used to emphasize the course Japan had to adopt.

The same imaginary dimension was still present at the beginning of the Meiji period. Before the Japanese even came to know the real Korea, the image they had of their neighbor was that of a “barbarian” country. This was a virtual and axiomatic barbarity, which only entered the sphere of reality after the opening of Korea in 1876. Here again, this imaginary discourse about Korea’s barbarity came to emphasize the fact that Japan was civilized. What was important was not Korea, but Korea’s contrast with Japan.

Like many other views of Korea, the nostalgic one, be it positive or negative, constituted as much discourse on Japan as on the Korean

peninsula. In many instances, Korea was no more than a means of exposing one's own view of Japan and its place in the world. Korea was acting as a foil to help the Japanese elaborate their image of an ideal, modern and civilized Japan.

It seems things have not changed much today.

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