

# A Bridge over a “Wide and Deep Ocean”? Representing the Korean Minority in Japanese TV Dramas

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## **Introduction: Characteristics of Japanese TV dramas**

Japanese TV drama series, aired weekly by the commercial TV channels during primetime for a period of about three months, are an important genre of popular culture in Japan. They do not merely serve as entertainment, but also as a discussion forum for social aspects such as gender issues.<sup>1</sup> In Japan, TV dramas<sup>2</sup> are perceived as being quite close to social reality. However, until the 1990s, Japanese dramas tended to only depict the average life of Japanese people, leaving out minorities and foreigners in Japan. Therefore, the dramas contributed to upholding the myth of the homogeneity of Japanese society.

As the main themes of these popular drama series are love stories, variations on these “boy meets girl stories” become necessary in order to arouse the interest of the audience. This might be a reason why dramas featuring rather unusual love relationships have been aired since the 1990s—for example, where one of the partners is physically disabled<sup>3</sup> or the woman is much older than the man. Since the start of the new millennium, people from other Asian countries, especially Chinese and Koreans, have frequently appeared in the TV dramas.<sup>4</sup>

In the case of Korea, the 2002 Soccer World Cup, jointly hosted by Japan and Korea, can be regarded a turning point. Japanese public and private TV channels started producing dramas featuring Korean-Japanese love stories, three of them were even Japanese-Korean co-productions. In 2003, the Korean drama “Winter Sonata”,<sup>5</sup> one of the first ever broadcast on the Japanese small screen, became enormously successful and sparked a ‘Korea Boom’ in Japan.<sup>6</sup> In 2004, a member of the Korean minority in Japan appeared as a heroine for the first time in the history of Japanese TV dramas.

The Korean minority in Japan is often called “invisible”.<sup>7</sup> To avoid discrimination, many of them decided to conceal their Korean descent by using Japanese names and attending Japanese schools. The fact that they were not depicted in Japanese TV dramas until recently has further increased their invisibility, even though they live as neighbours within Japanese society. As Iwabuchi Koichi argues, it is “crucial to consider how the media flows from South Korea have influenced, both constructively and unconstructively, the social

positioning and recognition of resident Koreans in Japan, most of whom are descendants of expatriates under Japanese colonial rule" (Iwabuchi 2008, 244).

This paper focuses on the representations of the Korean residents in Japanese TV dramas aired between 2002 and 2004. The analysis contributes to exploring "how Otherness is constructed when the 'Other' cannot be considered as totally 'alien', but when familiarity might also be of vital importance" (as described in the conference outline).

### **1. Japanese-Korean encounters in TV dramas**

A research project titled "Japan's Turn toward 'Asia' in Japanese Literature, Media and Popular Culture",<sup>8</sup> conducted at the Department of Japanese Studies at the University of Trier, analysed the literary works and various genres of media and popular culture. The focus was on Japanese TV dramas depicting encounters with people from other Asian countries. Particularly with respect to TV dramas in which a Korean character comes to Japan on a temporary basis and develops a relationship with a Japanese person, the following patterns prevail:

1. Japanese are constructed as individualists and 'modern' in contrast to family-oriented and thus 'traditional' Korean characters.
2. The Korean characters are represented as pursuing their (often creative) life dreams, whereas the Japanese seem to have few goals.
3. The Korean characters—who have the energy and vitality needed to overcome difficulties and achieve success in life—serve as role models for the Japanese, who are presented as lethargic and unmotivated.<sup>9</sup>

These patterns lead to the impression that the Korean characters are utilised for the sake of the Japanese heroes or heroines.

### **2. Korean resident women as minor figures in TV dramas (2001–2002)**

In two of the TV dramas presenting a Japanese-Korean love story, Korean resident women appeared as minor figures. In "Mō ichido kisu" ("One More Kiss"), the hero, a Japanese student, falls in love with a Korean singer whom he meets in Japan. In the story, Ri Masami, a Korean resident and fellow student of the protagonist, is a supporting character.

In this drama, which was broadcast in 2001 by the public channel NHK, the Korean minority is presented in a very positive way. Although the characters use their Korean family names (as only a minority of them do), they seem to be perfectly integrated into Japanese society and discrimination is not mentioned at all. Ri Masami invites the Japanese hero to her house and introduces him to the "Korean way of life". As Kristina Iwata-

Weickgenannt has pointed out, in this drama the Korean resident is reduced to her role as interpreter of Korean culture (Iwata-Weickgenannt 2011, 255). Once again, this depicts the pattern that the Korean character is utilised for the Japanese hero of the TV series.

In the famous Korean-Japanese co-production "Friends", jointly produced in 2002 by a Japanese and a Korean private TV channel, the Japanese heroine falls in love with a Korean man and takes Korean language lessons. In the class, she meets Midori, a third generation Korean resident, who has just started to learn Korean. Midori becomes a good friend of the Japanese heroine and is not merely utilised in her role as a provider of information about Korea (Iwata-Weickgenannt 2011, 256).

### **3. The first Korean resident featured as heroine of a TV series in "Tokyo Bayscape" (2004)**

Obviously, the "Korean boom" had paved the way, and after two supporting roles, a Korean resident woman was featured as the heroine of a TV series in 2004. "Tokyowankei –Destiny of Love" (Tokyo Bayscape), from Fuji TV, was advertised as "the first TV drama series with a Korean resident heroine". However, the drama is based on the novel "Tokyowankei" by Yoshida Shun'ichi in which the protagonist is not a Korean resident, but rather Japanese. Therefore, in this series, the topic of the Korean minority is evidently added in with the aim of profiting from the Korea boom. Many of the motifs are taken from the famous Korean series "Winter Sonata", which makes "Tokyo Bayscape" a kind of a remake of this well-known Korean drama. Consequently, the story becomes quite confusing, especially since it involves too many coincidences. In this paper, however, the focus will be on the representation of the Korean residents and their encounters with Japanese people.

#### **(1) The plot of the TV drama**

The heroine, a third generation Korean resident, goes by both the Japanese name Kimoto Mika and the Korean name Ri Mihyan; the latter is rarely used in the drama, however. She is played by Japanese actress Nakama Yukie. Mika is a 25-year-old career woman working at a renowned Japanese publishing company. She first attended a Korean school, then switched to a Japanese high school and university, which enabled her to pursue her professional career in a Japanese company.

Mika appears to be perfectly integrated into Japanese society and even has a Japanese boyfriend, a doctor. However, at the beginning of the drama series, he decides to break up with her because both parents are against their marriage. In her disappointment, Mika posts a message on a mobile phone dating service. As her workplace is in the mundane Odaiba district, at the Tokyo bay, she chooses "Tokyo Bayscape" as the region where she would like her partner to come from, and she subsequently meets Ryōsuke, a blue-collar worker at the

harbour, which is located on the side of Tokyo Bay opposite to where Mika works. They fall in love with each other and become a couple.

At that time, Mika reads her mother's secret diary and learns about the tragic love affair that her mother had with a Japanese man 30 years ago. When her lover had an accident, she was told that he died—although he had actually survived. A marriage was then arranged for her with a Korean resident, whom Mika now believes is her father. Mika's lover, Ryōsuke, is the son of her mother's ex-lover—of course neither is aware of this coincidence at the beginning. In the drama, the love stories of Mika and her mother, both with Japanese lovers, are paralleled by many accounts from the diary.

Mika's father is against her relationship with Ryōsuke, whom he believes to be the son of his wife's former lover. Because Mika's mother was pregnant when she married him, he thinks that Mika and Ryōsuke might be sister and brother.<sup>10</sup> However, he does not tell Mika about this and urges her to marry a Korean resident, the son of his business partner. Finally, Ryōsuke's father appears and reveals that not he, but rather a different Japanese man is Mika's biological father. Now Mika's father (actually the stepfather) can accept her relationship with Ryōsuke and a happy end for the couple becomes possible.

## **(2) Representations of the Korean residents**

Concerning the representations of the Korean residents, Iwabuchi Koichi, who has primarily analysed the aspect of audience reactions to this drama, takes a quite critical view:

[...] the drama depicts the issue with an exclusive focus to the personal distress of resident Koreans without giving due attention to the structured discrimination in Japanese society. Issues are reduced to the personal anguish of well-to-do Korean residents in Japan and social and historical issues are separated from the personal. Furthermore, the stubborn closed-ness of the resident Korean community is to blame for her agony, as symbolised by the protagonist's father who is represented as ethnocentric, obstinate and who thus cannot understand the developing relationship between Japan and Korea [...]. It is as if Koreans were all responsible for drawing the sharp exclusive line between Japanese and resident Koreans. (Iwabuchi 2008, 258)

It is indeed a typical trait of Japanese TV dramas, and not only in the case of "Tokyo Bayscene", that social problems are mostly reduced to a personal level and aspects such as "structured discrimination" tend to be neglected. Generally speaking, in contemporary Japanese TV dramas, political dimensions are liable to be omitted.

The way in which Korean residents are constructed in "Tokyo Bayscene" is fundamentally different from the representation of the Koreans who stay in Japan temporarily as depicted

in Japanese dramas produced in 2001–2002. In "Tokyo Bayscene", the members of the Korean minority—most of them played by Japanese actors—are not idealised at all. In particular, the Korean resident man, whom Mika's father has chosen as her fiancé, might be perceived by viewers as being a quite negative character. He even tries to separate Mika from Ryōsuke by using deceptive means. In the end, however, he apologises to her for doing so.

Mika's father also appears as a negative character in the beginning when he rejects his daughter's wish that he meet her Japanese boyfriend, the doctor, simply because he is Japanese. He always uses the metaphor of a "wide and deep ocean" that lies between Japan and Korea and cannot be overcome just by loving someone. This "wide and deep ocean" between the two countries is a leitmotif of the drama, although the colonial experience is not explicitly mentioned in it. When Mika's father also tries to force her to separate from her next Japanese lover, Ryōsuke, he indeed appears to be quite stubborn, at least as long as the audience does not know that he believes Ryōsuke is Mika's brother. However, this character undergoes an important development during the drama series. When he finally tells his daughter that not he, but another Japanese man is her biological father, he says: "You should be proud of your two countries of origin and try to be a bridge across the ocean separating Japan and Korea."

The heroine Mika, who serves as a character for the audience to identify with, is presented as a third generation Korean resident whose attitudes differ greatly from those of her father. She wants to select her marriage partner on her own and it is very natural for her to choose a Japanese man. She is portrayed as being perfectly integrated into Japanese society. This becomes clear when, at her workplace, she is entrusted with a report in the magazine about "wa no kokoro" ("the essential spirit of Japaneseness"). This gives her the opportunity to promote her boyfriend Ryōsuke, who dreams of becoming a calligraphy artist.

Mika tries to combine the two spheres she is living in: her family, dominated by her father who upholds Korean traditions, on the one hand, and her Japanese workplace and friends on the other. This is already revealed in the first scene of the drama: On Christmas eve, Mika has to attend a relative's wedding, but she leaves early to hurry to the party given by her Japanese boyfriend. When she arrives there, all of the Japanese guests are very astonished to see her in the traditional Korean dress. She soon realises that it marks her as a "foreigner" and asks her boyfriend if it was wrong not to change her clothes first. Although he emphasises that she is "very beautiful", this incident leads him to reconsider their relationship and make the decision to leave her.

Thus, the representation of the heroine Mika is also quite different from the Koreans in earlier dramas. No idealisation and utilisation for the sake of the Japanese characters can be observed. Mika is not typified as "traditional", even if she, like her Japanese lover Ryōsuke,

is quite family-oriented. Contrary to the previous dramas, in which lethargic young people are motivated by Korean characters to pursue a goal in life, in “Tokyo Bayscape”, the Japanese character Ryōsuke already has a dream, along with the vigour and drive to work for its realisation, when he meets the Korean resident.

Another very positive character in the story is Mika’s younger sister, played by the Korean resident singer and actress Sonim. When she finds out about Ryōsuke, she utters the opinion that a blue-collar worker is more likely to accept her as a Korean resident. This is indeed an important point. Whereas her former Japanese lover, a doctor, and thus a member of the upper-middle class, might have been afraid of hurting his reputation if he married a Korean resident, that is not a problem for Ryōsuke.

### **(3) Attitudes of the Japanese characters towards Korean residents**

In order to elucidate the message of this drama, it is important not only to analyse the representations of the Korean minority, but also the attitudes of the Japanese lovers of the two resident women, Mika and her mother. Mika’s first Japanese boyfriend, the doctor, says that the reason he decided to separate from her is because “I can’t become Korean and you can’t become Japanese”. This demonstrates that he, like Mika’s father, also sees a gap between the two countries that cannot be overcome. On the contrary, Mika’s mother’s Japanese lover and his son Ryōsuke are willing to bridge the gap. When Mika’s mother is standing together with her lover on the shores of the ocean, she says: “The Japanese sea between Japan and Korea seems so far to me”. He then answers without hesitation: “If you are on the other side, I will swim there anytime.” Almost the same words are uttered by his son, Ryōsuke, when he stands together with Mika on the side of Tokyo Bay where he works. However, he goes even further. When Mika’s father urges Mika to marry a Korean resident, Ryōsuke visits him and offers to become Korean and take Mika’s Korean family name.

Ryōsuke is thus presented as a member of the young generation, showing a real interest and high esteem for Korean culture and even decides to stay in Korea for a while to continue his calligraphy studies. He accepts Mika just the way she is, both as Japanese and as Korean. To signify this, he paints two calligraphies as a present for her: one with the Japanese word for “I”, *watashi*, and one with the Korean word for it. Although Mika and Ryōsuke live in such different worlds, they are quite similar to each other and appear to be soulmates.

The fact that nowadays, it is much easier to overcome the gap, is symbolised by the bridge over the Tokyo Bay (named Rainbow Bridge), which unites the places where both of them work. The bridge is also a leitmotif of the drama, shown in the background during many important scenes featuring Mika and Ryōsuke together; in contrast, in the case of Mika’s mother and Ryōsuke’s father, there was no bridge across the ocean between Japan and Korea.

The drama obviously conveys the message that today, it is possible to bridge the gap between Japanese and Korean residents, however, the attitude on the Japanese side is of utmost importance in this regard. Whereas in the 1980s, Mika's mother was separated from her Japanese lover, for Mika and Ryōsuke, who live in contemporary Japan, there is a happy ending. They even succeed in overcoming both ethnicity and class barriers. As in many novels, dramas and films on the topic of intercultural encounters, a bridge is once again used as a leitmotif which symbolises that, these days, lovers are able to bridge all kinds of gaps.

## Conclusion

This series appears to be a good case study for showing the possibilities and limitations of the TV drama genre in terms of dealing with social problems. By depicting the drama from the inner perspective of a Korean resident, "Tokyo Bayscape" has the potential to give insight into the situation faced by this minority, which is a decisive step towards eliminating the invisibility of the Korean minority.

However, entertainment and ratings are top priorities, especially in drama series aired by commercial TV stations. Therefore, the drama does not concentrate on the topic of the Korean minority, but tries to profit from the huge success of "Winter Sonata" by producing a Japanese version of this popular Korean drama. The result is quite a confusing story with too many disturbing elements, and the historical and political problems between the two countries are not addressed.

Since the series "Tokyo Bayscape" aired, Korean residents have appeared in supporting roles in other dramas. However, their situation is not the main focus of the drama. Hopefully, the genre of TV drama will continue to broaden the knowledge about Korean residents in Japan and contribute to a better understanding by presenting the Korean residents as part of Japanese society.

## Notes

- 1 For a discussion of gender roles in Japanese TV dramas, see e. g., Muramatsu 1979 and 1986, Gössmann 1998 and 2000, Valaskivi 1995 and 2000, Ito 2004, Freedman and Iwata-Weickgenannt 2011.
- 2 The term "TV drama" (*terebi dorama*) is used to refer to TV series as well as two-hour long TV films.
- 3 For a discussion of disability in Japanese TV dramas see Stibbe 2004.
- 4 For a discussion of intercultural encounters in Japanese TV dramas see e. g., Iwata-Weickgenannt 2011a, Gössmann 2007, Gössmann, Jaschke, Mrugalla 1998, Gössmann and Kirsch 2011, Gössmann and Kirsch forthcoming no. 1 and forthcoming no. 2, Kirsch 2007 and 2011.

- 5 The Korean TV series *Winter Sonata* (*Fuyu no sonata* in Japanese, KBS 2002–3) was first aired in 2003 by the Japanese public broadcaster NHK's satellite television station BS 2 and in 2004 by its terrestrial station.
- 6 For a discussion of the Korea boom triggered by "Winter Sonata", see e. g., Hayashi 2004 and 2005, Hayashi and Lee 2007, Iwabuchi and Huat 2008, Jōsai kokusai daigaku joseigaku kenkyūsho 2006, Lee 2004, Mizuta, Hasegawa and Kitada 2006, Mori 2004.
- 7 See, for example, Harajiri 1998. For a history of the Japanese colonisation of Korea and the current situation of the Korean minority in Japan, see e.g. Iwata-Weickgenannt 2011b, Ryang 2000 and Chapman 2008
- 8 The project was sponsored by the German Research Foundation [Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG)].
- 9 For a description of this patterns, see Gössmann/Kirsch, publication forthcoming no. 1.
- 10 This is a striking parallel to "Winter Sonata", where the two lovers also fear they are brother and sister because his mother and her father had a love affair.

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