

MIDDLE-AGED JAPANESE WOMEN'S LOVE AFFAIR WITH WINTER SONATA AND ITS SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS

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Fuyu no sonata, or *Winter Sonata*, is a soap opera that was broadcast by KBS Korea on Mondays and Tuesdays as a 20-episode, TV drama miniseries from January to March of 2002. The tear-jerking, overly sentimental melodrama with complicated story and character development, breathtakingly beautiful winter scenes, great acting, and very soothing, melancholic music instantly became a sensational social phenomenon in South Korea. Young Koreans adopted the fashion and the lifestyle, had dates at the shooting locations, and bought CDs and DVDs. The average audience rating was 23.1% in Korea.¹

Hanryu is a Chinese word coined for the “Korean boom” that encompasses various aspects of today’s popular culture scene in Asia.² *Hanryu* also refers to the social phenomenon of the powerful influence and great popularity of Korean-style movies, TV dramas, and K-POP (music). Korean pop culture has now become one of the leading exports of the country. It is also due to the Korean government’s support of the entertainment industry beginning in the 1990s. Japan was a bit late in appreciating *hanryu* as compared to other Asian nations, but its Korean boom started with an action film blockbuster *Shuri* in 2000.³ Many fans of *Winter Sonata* in Japan are also familiar with popular Korean movies such as *Christmas in August* (1998), *Il Mare* (2000), *My Sassy Girl* (2001), *Brotherhood* (2003), and *The Classic* (2003), as well as Korean TV dramas like *Autumn in My Heart* (2000), *Hotelier* (2001), *Beautiful Days* (2001), *All In* (2003), *Scent of Summer* (2003), and *Stairway of Heaven* (2003-2004).

¹ Okumura Junro, *Aishiteru! Kankoku dorama* [Loving Korean Dramas!] (Tokyo: TOKIMEKI Publishing, 2004); and Diana Lee, “Why Is *Winter Sonata* a Big Hit in Asia?” (www.koreanfilm.org/tvdramas/wintersonata.html, 9/10/2003).

² *Josei sebun* (5/13/2004).

³ Setsuko Kamiya, “Korean Love Story Heats Up Japan,” *The Japan Times* (4/7/2004).

The Korean TV dramas are known for their excellence in dramatic story development, intelligibility, tempo, straightforward and extreme expressions of emotions, and tears.⁴ Korean melodramas also have all the essential ingredients for a big success – the secret of birth, a rich and charming male protagonist who is a “prince,” amnesia, double love triangles, traffic accidents, bullying, conflicts and struggles between parents and their adult children, an incurable disease afflicting the protagonist, studying abroad (especially in the United States and France), and lovers running together along the shoreline.⁵

The Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai (NHK), which is a Japanese version of the BBC, broadcast *Winter Sonata* on BS2, one of its satellite channels, in April of 2003. The 20-episode melodrama was broadcast at 10:00 PM on Thursdays, and it was very popular and well accepted by the Japanese, especially women in their 30s to 80s. The avid viewers requested that NHK rebroadcast the program. The broadcasting company received more than 20,000 positive responses and requests for reruns mainly from women in their 40s and 50s. The NHK complied and aired all 20 episodes again on the same satellite channel in December 2003. In April 2004, the NHK started a weekly broadcast of *Winter Sonata* again on its terrestrial main channel on Saturdays at around 11:10 PM. The exact starting time depended on the preceding program, such as a professional baseball game or a special news report. This time slot had traditionally been reserved for such popular American TV series as *Ally McBeal*, *ER*, *The West Wing*, and *Beverly Hills 90210*.⁶ *Fuyu no sonata*, or *Fuyu sona* for short as it is generally called by Japanese fans and the mass media, has become a social phenomenon in Japan, as well as many other Asian countries such as China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam, and the Philippines, not to mention Korea where it was produced.

The NHK's book division sold 860,000 novelized books of the screen play, which became a best seller, 280,000 program guidebooks, and 150,000 DVDs and videos.⁷ The NHK's secondary income from the copyrights of the *Winter Sonata* logo and the production of the Japanese version DVDs topped 100,000,000 yen, which is approximately 909,000 US dollars. This brought about NHK's 14th consecutive year of being in the

⁴ *Nikkei Woman* (Tokyo: Nikkei hōmu shuppansha, June 2004), p. 147.

⁵ Okumura, *Aishiteru!*, pp. 18-21.

⁶ Kamiya, “Korean Love Story Heats Up Japan.”

⁷ *Nikkei Woman*, p. 147.

black.⁸ Other related goods such as Polaris necklaces and cell phone straps, post cards, photographic magazines, jigsaw puzzles, playing cards, wool mufflers, and CDs are sold in stores and on the internet, which is a very brisk business in Japan and Asia. Tour packages to visit the shooting sites in Korea also became very popular.

Middle-aged Japanese women are crazy not only about the beautiful love story but also the leading actor, Bae Yong Joon, who was born in 1972. He visited Japan on April 3, 2004. More than 5,000 avid fans, mostly housewives in their 30s and 40s, showed up at Tokyo's Haneda International Airport on the day of his arrival. Many stayed up all night at the airport the night before.⁹ More than 60,000 women applied for the lottery of one of the 2,000 seats in the Shibuya Public Hall where Bae Yong Joon met and talked on stage with his fans. Another two thousand women, most of them in their 20s to 50s, flocked to the Hall and waited outside just to have a glimpse of the handsome actor.¹⁰

Bae Yong Joon, or Yon-sama as he is affectionately called by his enthusiastic Japanese fans and the mass media, stayed in Japan for several days to promote his new movie *Untold Scandal*, which is a Korean version of a Hollywood flick, *Dangerous Liaisons*, based in turn on a French classic. Many restaurants and coffee shops in Tokyo where the handsome actor dined instantly became popular tourist spots with the Japanese women who wanted to have the same food that he ate.

Many middle-aged Japanese women who are avid fans of *Fuyu no sonata* are acting just like the American teenaged girls who became fans of the movie *Titanic* and its leading actor Leonardo DiCaprio in 1998. The avid fans of *Fuyu sona* watch the TV program on TV, videotape it, and view it again and again, especially the memorable scenes with wonderful, romantic, or philosophical lines, and they cry.

Each episode of the Japanese version of *Winter Sonata* is 60 minutes long in order to fit into the time frame, and director Yoon Soek Ho edited the melodrama himself. Many buy the DVDs, whose episodes are 70 minutes long (not an abbreviated version), and listen to the melodies of the soundtrack CDs. There are many websites, or rather "clubs," where the fans can communicate via internet. More than 10,000 sites show up upon entering "Bae Yong Joon" in an internet website search. At Yahoo.com

⁸ *Asahi Shinbun* (5/27/2004).

⁹ *Josei seibun* (5/13/2004).

¹⁰ *Asahi Shinbun* (4/05/2004).

17,000 sites showed up when I searched for *Winter Sonata* in June 2004. The Japanese fans interact with one another on the internet exchanging points of view, sharing emotions, reactions, and experiences, and providing information on Korean culture, customs and manners, geography, and tourism. More than 900 fans joined the tour called “Visiting Korea to Meet Bae Yong Joon,” during which they visited the shooting locations of *Fuyu sona* in Korea. The leading actress, Choi Ji Woo, was appointed “ambassador of Korean tourism and public relations” by the Korean Ministry of Culture and Tourism to promote tourism in Korea as part of the program called “The Korean Wave 2004.”¹¹ Choi Ji Woo and the director visited Japan in March 2004 as the NHK prepared for the rerun of *Fuyu no sonata* that was to start the next month.

The tear-jerking *Winter Sonata* is a melodrama that truly makes the audience cry with emotions. A box of Kleenex and a handkerchief (or even a towel!) is a must for at least 19 of the 20 episodes. *Winter Sonata* starts with the high school days of the two destined lovers Jung Yu Jin and Kan Joon Sang, a transfer student from Seoul who was searching for his father whom he had never met. The first two episodes entail their first encounter on a bus in Chunchon, Korea on their way to school, the development of their friendship, their falling in love, first kiss, and the “death” of Joon Sang in a traffic accident. The third episode takes place ten years later in Seoul. Yu Jin is now engaged to Kim Sang Hyuk, her high school classmate and Joon Sang’s rival. On her way to their engagement party, Yu Jin encounters a man who looks exactly like the late Joon Sang, who was her first love whom she could never forget. She tries frantically to find him again on the streets of Seoul and misses the engagement party. Lee Min Yong, who looks like Joon Sang and was pursued by Yu Jin without success that night, happened to be the director of a company which had just signed the contract with Yu Jin’s interior design company. Yu Jin now starts working with Min Yong at a ski resort, and they gradually fall in love.

The main theme of the melodrama is love that encompasses various shades and kinds among the different characters and their relationships. Diana Lee lists them as: (1) puppy love, (2) first love, (3) possessive love, (4) lost love, (5) parental love, and (6) true love, at least one or a few of which the audience has had similar experiences with in their lives, and which enable them to empathize and identify with the emotions

¹¹ *Asahi Shinbun* (3/08/2004).

and feelings of different characters in the story.¹² The story also revolves around the complex love of three sets of parent-child relationships in addition to the double love triangles of the young offspring and their friends. It also entails much suspicion concerning the identity of the male protagonist (Can Min Yong be Joon Sang? Are Min Yong and Joon Sang twins or related?), as well as the mystery of his birth (Who is Joon Sang's father?). *Winter Sonata* evokes in its audience various emotions ranging from infatuation, affection, love and romance, self-worth, control, guilt, possessiveness, anger, frustration, embarrassment, resentment, jealousy, despair, and loss to repentance, and the like. The soap opera definitely is a department store of all human emotions that everyone can identify with.

Many attractions of the melodrama include the beauty of the cinematography with breathtakingly gorgeous winter scenes, good-looking actors and actresses, and clever, classy, and soothing lines and words of love and affection that resonate with one's soul. The popularity of the Korean soap opera is a reflection of what Japanese social life lacks. The story depicts strong love, affection, caring, and bonding among the family members in modern Korea that any person from a dysfunctional family can admire and envy. It also shows the beauty of the strong ties of Korean friendship and camaraderie among workmates. The Korean characters are depicted as caring, sympathetic, and always supportive of their friends and colleagues as well as strangers and the elderly. The older generation in Korea is respected by the young, and adult children listen to their parents (sometimes with much reservation, doubt, frustration, and anger). The Japanese, on the other hand, do not respect the elderly as much as the Koreans do, and when there is a parent-child conflict, it is usually the parent who concedes these days.¹³ Confucianism is still institutionalized and deeply-rooted in everyday Korean life, while modernity in the new millennium has been affecting the Japanese family and society more generally in negative ways due to child and elderly abuse, an increase in domestic violence and divorce, sexless marriages, adultery, and suicides of the breadwinners who were laid off during the recession, among others.

Any middle-aged Japanese woman whose life lacks the excitement of love and romance, intimacy, and effective communication with her husband as well as an appreciation from family members for her hard work of household chores could easily get involved with the soap opera

¹² Lee, "Why Is *Winter Sonata* a Big Hit in Asia?"

¹³ Okumura, *Aishiteru!*, p. 20.

emotionally. The Korean melodrama, just like Japanese ladies' comics,¹⁴ can complement their otherwise unsatisfactory, uneventful, and boring lives. The soap opera is an opiate, and it is very easy to get hooked on the intriguing story development.

The Japanese, especially men, tend to suppress their emotions whether it is love, sorrow, anger, or frustration. The Japanese samurai tradition dictated that men not show much emotion and the principle of communication is, "silence is golden." Implicit communication still dominates Japanese culture. Facial expressions, tone of voice, silence, grunts, eye contact, and other subtle hints are as important as explicit, spoken words. Japanese communication belongs to that of a high-context culture.¹⁵ The Koreans in the soap opera, on the other hand, are much more straightforward and honest in their show of emotions and feelings. Many Japanese middle-aged women do not get enough communication from their workaholic husbands who do not know how to express themselves, especially with feelings of love and affection. The women get thrilled, and their romantic fantasy is fulfilled when the super-close-up face of the handsome Bae Yong Joon says, "I love you," with sincerity and tears in his eyes. The situation is almost like hypnosis, as if he is saying these words to each woman in the audience directly.

Many middle-aged and older women are reminded of the good old days when they were young and when Japanese TV programs and movies showed more platonic and innocent kinds of love and romance. *Fuyu sona* does not have any romantic bedroom scenes, and the most that the protagonists do in terms of showing love and affection are hugs and kisses on the lips only. A 76-year old woman who was an avid fan of *Winter Sonata* said that the program and the protagonists' pure love reminded her of her youth. She was given a soundtrack CD for a Mother's Day gift.¹⁶ The melodrama also develops like a story in classical girls' comics from the

¹⁴ Kinko Ito, "The World of Japanese Ladies' Comics: From Romantic Fantasy to Lustful Perversion," *Journal of Popular Culture* 36/1 (2002): 68-85; and Kinko Ito, "Japanese Ladies' Comics as Agents of Socialization: The Lessons They Teach," *International Journal of Comic Art* 5/2 (2003): 425-436.

¹⁵ Edward Hall, *Beyond Culture* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1977); and Hall, *The Dance of Life* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1984).

¹⁶ Goto Hanei, "Wagaya no hahanohi," [Mother's Day in My Family] *Chikyū rajio dayori*, NHK (5/27/2004).

1960s and the 1970s. Middle-aged women are familiar with the clever schemes of their story development.

One of the reasons why *Winter Sonata* appeals to so many people is that watching the melodrama is a spiritual or religious experience. Many fans watch the program again and again after they videotape the program or on a DVD. The messages that are transmitted through the clever lines, beautiful sceneries, and human emotions shown in tears are soothing to the soul. The melodrama shows many aspects of human relationships, true emotions, and raw feelings as well as death, the meaning of life, love, compassion, hope, and prayers, in addition to coincidences and connectedness that brings wonder to our daily life. An opportunity to be able to meet again deceased loved ones is one of the most basic desires of human experience, and *Winter Sonata* fulfills that need very nicely. As the story progresses, not only the characters in the melodrama but also the viewers grow and learn lessons of life, especially in appreciating, respecting, caring, and loving those who are part of the fabric of their lives. Every moment they spend together is precious. It is a "gift" because we are in "the present." Taking on the roles of others, or putting ourselves in their shoes and seeing from their perspectives makes us more compassionate and humane because understanding comes through empathy. "I'm sorry," is one of the most oft-spoken sentences in *Winter Sonata*. Just about every single character says "I'm sorry," at one point or another, and the male and female protagonists say the phrase most often. Conflict is a natural part of human life, and we often end up hurting others whether we like it or not. Apologizing is also a very normal and natural part of *Winter Sonata*, and the female protagonist cries in every episode except the first two when she was in high school. The viewers might reflect on their own past or current lives and feel sorry for those whom they might have inadvertently hurt. Self-reflection is possible as the viewer sees the program.

One of the main symbols of *Winter Sonata* is Polaris, the North Star. Joon Sang, the high school aged male protagonist says to Yu Jin when he found her after she had gotten lost in the woods at night that she should follow Polaris because it always stays in the same place throughout the seasons. A decade later when Yu Jin gets lost in her relationships with her family and other friends, Min Yong tells her that he will be her Polaris. She would not get lost again. He would always be there for her regardless. He is the guiding star, and she just has to believe in him and follow her fate. Many Asian women might find these scenes very romantic and they are

greatly moved. They might have a secret desire to be led and protected by a man rather than staying independent.

Fuyu no sonata is basically about love and compassion. It teaches the audience that there are different kinds of love, how important it is to always act and behave out of love, and that you must believe in love. The very ending scene of the soap opera is the triumph of love and fate that Yu Jin and her man believed in.

Winter Sonata is a very popular form of entertainment, and it also has been playing an educational role for middle-aged Japanese women. They are eager to learn more about the Korean language, culture (customs and manners, values, social norms, ethics, philosophy, etc.), history, geography, and so on in order to understand the melodrama better. NHK's *Winter Sonata* website features several categories of information in regards to the melodrama, like the time table of the broadcast, introduction of the drama, the characters and their relationships, the actors and actresses, the story line for each episode, Korean customs and manners, location sites, geography, the photo gallery, and the lyrics of the theme songs.¹⁷

Interestingly *Winter Sonata* also helped many middle-aged to elderly people become familiar with new computer technology as they read and wrote to the many websites that featured *Fuyu sona* for the first time. These people, who had been computer illiterate before, learned how to hook up their new computers, manage a keyboard, and use websites to gain information about the melodrama and write their opinions.

“Chatting” on websites has also become a social phenomenon. It is very convenient for working women and mothers as well as housewives who stay home. They can access many people with whom they share the same interests at any time they like. The web pages also open a new world for them because they can “meet” people on the web whom they would not likely meet in their busy everyday life and “chat” with them. Men also write to these websites since they do not find many other men to chat with about the melodrama. Many websites offered off-site meetings where fans actually met the other fans in a restaurant, coffee shop, etc.¹⁸

¹⁷ www3.nhk.or.jp/kaigai/sonata/ (link no longer active).

¹⁸ Yatabe Yuko, *Fuyu no sonata koyuroku: nettode hanasaku idobata kaigi* [The Record of *Winter Sonata* Companionship – The Blossoming of Housewives' Gossip on the Internet] (Tokyo: TOKIMEKI Publishing, 2004).

Fuyu sona, as it is shown on the NHK, is dubbed in Japanese, and the TV audience can either opt for the Japanese or Korean language version or try to listen to them both at the same time. Bae Yong Joon has a deep, soothing, sweet voice that turns any woman on (as far as I am concerned, I am convinced it does!). Many women started to learn Korean in order to listen to Bae Yong Joon's voice in the original language, which, believe it or not, almost sounds like melodic French, especially those softly spoken words of love and affection. The dubbed Japanese version has a higher pitch sound to it. The NHK offers a weekly language course on its educational channel called *Hangul kōza*, or *Korean Language Course* at 11:30 PM on Tuesdays. When Bae Yong Joon was featured in its monthly textbook published by the NHK in July 2003, the textbook was sold out. The NHK printed 200,000 copies of the language textbook for the month of May in 2004 in advance of the rerun that started in April.¹⁹

A woman whose handle is "Hamatteru Onna" (A Woman Who Is Hooked [on *Winter Sonata*]) wrote on a web page:

"I seriously decided to study Korean language. I want to understand Mr. Bae Yong Joon's dramas in Korean."²⁰

"I started learning Korean, aiming to master it somehow in half a year. I want to be able to read Hangul – good enough to be able to read the lyrics of the CDs. My motivation is so strong that I study Korean efficiently."²¹

Many other fans of *Fuyu sona* said on the websites that they had either started learning Korean already or were thinking seriously about taking up lessons on TV or in a language school. The language schools where they offer Korean language programs are popular, and they use scenes from *Winter Sonata* as a teaching aid.

This *Fuyu sona* fever among middle-aged Japanese women is a very positive step towards the improvement of mutual Japan-Korea understanding which started when the two nations co-hosted the FIFA World Cup Soccer Games in 2002. The games also propelled cultural exchanges between the two countries.

¹⁹ *Nikkei Woman*, p. 152.

²⁰ www.yomiuri.co.jp/komachi/reader (5/16/2003). Author's translation.

²¹ *Ibid.* (6/13/2003).

Historically the relationship between Japan and Korea has never been very favorable to the Koreans. Hideyoshi Toyotomi invaded Korea, a peaceful nation ruled by academics based on the principles of Confucianism, in 1592. The invading army was defeated, and Hideyoshi withdrew from Korea in 1598. However, the nationwide war had devastated Korea, and the invasion by the Army of the Qing Dynasty of China followed between 1627 and 1637.

In 1875 Japan forced open Korea which had a self-imposed seclusion policy, and imposed an unequal treaty in February 1876. Japan annexed Korea in 1910, created the government-general of Korea, and forced the people to speak Japanese. The March 1st uprising of 1919 demanded that Koreans attain independence from the Japanese, but it ended up killing more than 7,000 people. After the Great Kanto Earthquake that hit the Tokyo area, some 6,000 Koreans were blamed for the calamity and were killed by the Japanese military and police as well as armed citizens. Many Korean men were taken to Japan as forced laborers, and many Korean women were forced to be “comfort women” during World War II, serving as prostitutes for Japanese soldiers. This comfort women issue has not yet been resolved between the aging Korean women and the Japanese government. Japan’s defeat and unconditional surrender at the end of the war in 1945 brought the emancipation of Korea. It no longer was a colony of Japan.

Contemporary Japanese still tend to look down upon Koreans as a minority. Many Korean-Japanese who reside in Japan cannot obtain Japanese passports, and suffer from various kinds of both overt and covert prejudice and discrimination. Many Japanese do not know much about Korea, either – its history, culture, and society – even though it is the closest foreign country that influenced and contributed to the blossoming of ancient Japanese culture in the arts, crafts, textiles, and ceramics, as well as the introduction of Buddhism. In 1982, both Korea and China protested the wording of Japanese history textbooks, which promoted the revisionist approach to history in Japanese society.²² The Koreans are more sensitive about the history between the two nations, and very strong anti-Japanese sentiment, hatred, and resentment still linger among them.

Winter Sonata provoked Japanese interest in Korean culture and society in general. Mr. Chae Hyo An said in his interview:

²² Edwin O. Reischauer, *Japan: The Story of a Nation* (New York: McGraw-Hill Publishing Company, 1990).

“I heard that the image the Japanese have of Korea has changed thanks to *Winter Sonata*. There are increasing numbers of Japanese who are studying Korean as they watch the program. I consider dramas the supreme popular entertainment that includes the country's culture, emotions, and fashions, and it is great that the mutual understanding between Korea and Japan is promoted by *Winter Sonata*.”²³

This enthusiasm and desire of middle-aged Japanese women for learning Korean history, language, culture, and geography is very positive because it contributes to the understanding of the nation and the people that have been traditionally (both intentionally and unintentionally) looked down on by the Japanese. The willingness to learn should be the primary aim of education, not the forced kind of education with a classroom, a teacher, a textbook, exercises, and midterm and final exams. The good-looking Korean actor, Bae Yong Joon, is now a glamorous and desirable target of infatuation and longing which might lead to a dramatic decrease in the emotions and feelings that contribute to racism, prejudice, and discrimination against Koreans.

January 2004 in Korea marked “The Fourth Emancipation of Japanese Culture,” which lifted the prohibition of Japanese popular culture that had been banned for a long time. The Korean government is becoming more lenient in letting Japanese popular culture penetrate the society. Before the governmental emancipation, Korean youth were eager to learn about Japan through the internet.²⁴ It seems that greater mutual understanding between Korea and Japan is now truly possible.

Hanryu entertainment has been bringing not only the Japanese and Koreans together but also various other nations of Asia. Many Asians feel that the Korean movies and TV dramas are refreshing, and provide them with a sense of intimacy thanks to shared racial characteristics as well as both basic Asian cultural elements and a common mentality and sentimentality today. Many feel that they found “something” authentic they had lost in the process of modernization or from the influence and dominance of the West in popular culture.

²³ Okumura, *Aishiteru!*, p. 95. Author's translation.

²⁴ *Nikkei Woman*, p. 153.

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