

Japan's Vietnam War: 1960s Politics, Korea, and the US in the Films of Ōshima Nagisa

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Abstract: In the late 1960s, the Japanese government began providing economic and material support to the United States as they fought the Vietnam War. In response to this support, leftist groups and artists staged repeated anti-war protests demanding an end to Japanese participation. At the same time, many of these artists were attempting to explore and critique the historical relationship Japan had with its closest neighbor, Korea. These two countries shared common cultural trends, a tense colonial history, and a contemporary period suggesting an unknown future for both countries. Criticism of Japan's relationships to both the Vietnam War and historical Korea were not unrelated; while the Japanese government's material support to the US was substantial, the South Korean government went one step further, providing foreign (non-Vietnamese) troops exceeded in numbers only by the US military itself. Considering the anti-war and anti-Korean figures in the Japanese political scene, untangling the contemporary and historical relationships between these four countries is difficult and fraught with tension.

One filmmaker, Ōshima Nagisa, made several attempts to do so, linking the present situation in Vietnam with Japan's own history with Korea, and its current relationship to the United States. Taking a critical stance against both Japan's own left wing and the government's cozy relationship with the United States, Ōshima sought to explicate Japan's relationship as a complicit violator of Vietnam in several films, most notably *Nihon shunka-kō* (1966) and *Kaette kita yopparai* (1968) but also in *Muri shinjū: Nihon no natsu* (1967) and *Kōshikei* (1968). In these films, Japanese government participation in the American-led Vietnam War is portrayed as an echo of their actions in colonial Korea, representing a forgetting and repeating of Japanese historical violence against neighbors; these Korean and Vietnamese neighbors, I argue, are differentiated in Ōshima's films only by paper-thin notions of nationality intended to be

broken down as a critique of government participation in America's Vietnamese imperial engagement.

Keywords: Ōshima Nagisa, Japanese film, Japanese colonialism, Vietnam War, Korea, apologizing for history.

“Boiled down, red peppers become even hotter. And wheat, once dead, sprouts anew.”

Diary of Yunbogi (1965)¹

Japan in the 1960s was the site of a variety of anti-war, anti-government, and general “new leftist” groups emerging out of the rapidly changing economic and political conditions. Sparked by a security treaty between the Japanese and US governments, but eventually encompassing environmental degradation in the cities and relationships with Japan's closest neighbors, large numbers of left-wing groups—centered around local labor unions, student groups, and the Communist and Socialist political parties—spurred with each other and the police to make known their desire to move Japan away from a rightist, America-dominated client state.

Although not a primary source of left-wing anger, the regional presence of the American-led Vietnam War was an additional factor in the wider left-wing anti-war, anti-America protest movements. Japan, physically and economically supporting a number of US military bases, found itself a partner in the Vietnam War, whether or not the Japanese people wanted a presence or not. Naturally, left-wingers, anti-war by nature, marched in the streets with anti-Vietnam War slogans as part of their repertoire.

Taking a position both in between and outside these stances—of government support for America's anti-communist efforts, and strigent demands for an end to the war—was the director Ōshima Nagisa. An

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ardent left-winger himself, Ōshima could not find himself siding with the anti-war protesters. Instead, he would lean towards a different set of ideas, ones which emphasized the importance of ending violence in Vietnam, but also forced Japanese protesters and government officials alike to acknowledge Japan's own mistakes. These ideas become apparent in a series of films made after Ōshima made trips to Vietnam and Korea; these films, made between 1965 and 1968, depict Vietnamese, Americans, Japanese, and Koreans (both North and South) in a violent struggle for domination and independence. Two of his films look at the history of Vietnam and Korea, and their relationships with Japan, in isolation. *Japanese Summer: Double Suicide* (*Muri Shinjū: Nihon no Natsu*, 1967) attempts to explain Vietnamese wartime grief by relocating the spatial and personal destruction of the war onto the Japanese mainland, essentially turning Japan as a space into wartime Vietnam. His later film, *Death by Hanging* (*Kōshikei*, 1968) meanwhile, acts as a treatise on the failures of both capital punishment in Japan and the integration of the Korean minority community. These two films, however, do not make explicit the connection between the contemporaneous Vietnam War and Japan's own colonial history in Korea.

Ōshima, however, was not ignorant of the connection, and two other films made in this period would relate the previous war with the contemporaneous one: *A treatise on Japanese bawdy songs* (*Nihon shunka-kō*, 1967) and *Three resurrected drunkards* (*Kaette kita yopparai*, 1968). These two films interweave the messy history of Japan and Korea with the war in Vietnam involving both countries, and the relationship of all three with America. In this paper, I argue that within these two films produced by Ōshima, although the colonial period and the Vietnam War are separate phases in Japan's history, are two different sides to a continuous image of Japan. This image is composed of the memory of Japan's colonial presence in WWII-era Korea as a violent oppressor now being repeated in Vietnam under the guise of an "American Empire," with the Japanese and (South) Korean governments connected together underneath this umbrella. These governments stand in opposition to the people of Japan and Korea themselves, who despite sharing ancestors and history are unable to overcome their own relationships with imperialism, and are thus doomed to repeat colonial Japan's violence in Korea, by acting upon Vietnam in cooperation with the US government.

The Vietnam War as Viewed from Japan

Throughout the 1960s, Japan, and Tokyo in particular, were the site of repeated protests against the Vietnam War and Japan's participation in it as an economic and strategic partner to the United States. Partially coordinated by the Organization for Peace in Vietnam (*Betonamu ni heiwa wo! shimin rengō*, or *Beheiren*) and informally led by Oda Makoto, anti-Vietnam War protests and demonstrations were a near-constant presence in Japan until the early 1970s, largely paralleling the labor and education protests occurring at the same time.²

Concurrently, the Japanese and South Korean governments were trying to work out solutions over WWII atrocities so that the two countries could establish diplomatic relations. With both countries acting as the hosts of massive military resources for the United States, and a perceived need to buffer up against Soviet- and Chinese-affiliated North Korea, the two governments viewed cooperation through formal diplomatic relations as more important than any historical conflicts, no matter how recent or heated they may have been. The significant presence of the US government influenced the normalization of relations between the Japanese and South Korean governments, and as a part of the treaty, included monetary payments from Japan to South Korea. These were given ostensibly as a sort of apology for colonial actions but also to help bolster the Korean economy, a task which Washington had supported but needed help with given its newfound war in Vietnam (Dudden 2008, 42-45).

Of course, for Japan to establish diplomatic relations with South Korea was to convey a tremendous political message; acknowledging America-aligned South Korea as a complete "Korea" was to explicitly deny Communist North Korea's right to its existence as a government. Additionally, this acknowledgment as both countries were increasing their financial involvement in the war against North Vietnam only heightened the anti-Communist sentiment of the Japanese government, a suggestion considered unfathomable to the anti-war protesters (Havens 1987, 82-3). In effect, protest against both the South Korean government and the Japan/Korea diplomatic treaty was rolled into the overall anti-war, anti-government protests which would continue for the next five years.

² For more information on Beheiren, see *Fire Across the Sea*, from 54.

Ōshima's Relationship with *Beheiren*, Vietnam, and Cinema

As popular as these protests were at the time, Ōshima did not lend his support to them. In fact, he levied strong criticism against the group, calling the text of their initial invitation to join, “childish and crude” (Ōshima 1992, 92). Instead, he gave praise to the democracy protests in South Korea, where he described rallies in which students appeared to be ready to die for their demands. That he could not see this kind of passion in Japanese rallies led him to believe that they could not actually cause real change.

The failure behind these anti-war protests relates to what Ōshima viewed as an inadequate comprehension of the true nature of total war, a criticism he levied against *Beheiren*. Ōshima in this period writes with the assumption that he could comprehend total war with crystal clarity, and credits his trips to both South Korea and Vietnam; he used these trips to expand his criticism of both the overwhelming American presence throughout eastern Asia, and the conduct of anti-war, anti-US protest groups in Japan.

Ōshima's writings on Vietnam, Korean protesters, and the Japanese anti-war movement reflect his immediate feelings after seeing and participating in these events, and for this reason, frequently contradict each other. Ōshima does, however, elucidate on the strong similarities between Japan in the immediate post-WWII, Korea in the contemporary period, and mid-war Vietnam. In relation to Korea, he states,

In Japan twenty years already passed since the end of the last war, but in Korea it has only been ten years. Korea, moreover, is in the same state of military preparedness and is as politically oppressed as it would be if a war were actually in progress. It is understandable that the reconstruction of Korean cities is progressing, if at all. They are in the same state that Japan's cities were in three or four years after World War II. (Ōshima 1992, 61)

Setting up the environmental and economic differences between Korea and Japan is important for Ōshima's analysis of these two countries, because the differences are what define Japan's failure to truly protest the war effort. He sees Korea, in its current state, as a reminder of what Japan was immediately after the war, but no longer is. Ōshima draws this parallel to emphasize the difference between Korea's politics and Japan's, as he states in a later article:

I had been to Korea and seen the student demonstrations there. To them, the significance of whatever slogan they were displaying at the time was that they would die for it on the spot. Their slogans, the result of a careful consideration of the strengths of their allies and their enemies, were displayed right at the border separating them from their enemies as their most effective combat weapons. [...] Conversely, they displayed slogans that consistently made the ultimate battle possible. Sometimes they were against the government, sometimes they were against Japan, sometimes they were against the United States, sometimes they were for unification; sometimes their slogans were a combination of all these views. The troops at the front moved forward thinking that they could die for that slogan at any time, and, moved by this the general public proceeded with the same feeling. Who among the Japanese, calling himself a leader or a member of a leading party, had ever reached that kind of conclusion based on the slogan, “Peace in Vietnam”? (Ōshima 1992, 95)

In his view, Korean life, one of great trauma and oppression, supports the real need for anti-war, anti-government criticism; in Japan, where the power of economic development has stripped the immediate necessity for action, the protesters cannot possibly carry “true” demands. Maybe, to Ōshima, they would all have to take a trip to Korea and Vietnam to truly understand protest. At the same time, the economic and social conditions in Vietnam reflect a level of poverty which, when that is all an individual knows, prevents them from social action:

I saw Vietnam. If you merely say you’ve been to Vietnam, that doesn’t necessarily mean that you can say you’ve seen it. This is what all of the proponents of avant-garde art have been saying since *Hirōshima mon amour*. Can I definitely say that I’ve seen Vietnam? I think I definitely can. When I went to Vietnam, something was born inside of me. No, to be precise, I would have to say that something broke inside of me.

It occurred to me that to look at human beings and think that you ought to do something [political] is always futile. An emaciated dog and some children living in an abandoned house in a burned-out village. Women who come running out to the bus under the blazing sun to sell one pineapple. With the sound of artillery nearby, soldiers who will fight for 40 yen a day, bragging that they kill people just because they’re there. I got caught up in the thought that it was probably futile to believe that one ought to do something for these people, or that they can do something for themselves. I saw those people in Korea last year as well. [...]

Do the people have political responsibility? Can they attain happiness on the basis of politics? I was assailed by the impulse to say no to both questions. The people don’t have a political responsibility. Who can ask

them to take responsibility? If so, the people are nothing more than the perpetual victims of politics. If they are victims, wouldn't it be better for the people not to embrace the illusion that politics can bring them happiness? These ideas blew through me like gales. (Ōshima 1992, 96)

To Ōshima, the sheer economic hardship he has seen in war-torn Vietnam prevents serious political gains, as the economic poverty prevents meaningful liberation through political means. This kind of interpretation of everyday life in Korea and Vietnam stands in contrast, to an extent, with what Ōshima writes on Korean protesters, for whom political action is a definite path towards liberation. In between these ideas rests the ideology of the late 1960s films. In many ways, political protest cannot bring about the social change that *Beheiren* desires, but with some education into social and economic status, and by extension acknowledgment of social history, such as that seen in South Korea, the power of those protests can bring about some measure of change. This lack of power in the Japanese protests is what Ōshima hates, and a failure to comprehend social conditions in these countries is a part of that lacking.

What is important to acknowledge in Ōshima's statement from the above is the manner in which he is describing the anti-war protests in Japan, and specifically how they relate to his own perceptions of protests and social disorder. In fact, much of Ōshima's statements on war protest, represented in his essays and in the films he makes, suggest a hardened, close-minded opinion largely rejecting of other social groups within Japan, and with particular hatred against the left-wing. Much of this rejection comes from his experiences supporting the ANPO protests in the late 1950s; the protest groups, which frequently splintered over ideological lines, were critiqued and mocked in his 1961 film *Night and fog in Japan* (*Nihon no yoru to kiri*).

One issue with *Night and fog in Japan* is that it fails to provide a solution for the splintering and the crises in the Japanese left wing. Instead, it functions as something closer to a requiem. In Ōshima's eyes, the Japanese left-wing cannot function as a credible opposition or as an agent for change because it is too obsessed with its own narrative and ideology to provide a credible push against the agents of the state. Ōshima, on the other hand, is able to offer his views as critique of those failures, even if he does not necessarily present a way to solve them.

The importance of Ōshima's faith in his own opinions is somewhat problematic because he is an upper-class Japanese man claiming to speak

for the rights and privileges of poorer Koreans and Vietnamese, both in Japan and Korea, and one who has emphatically broken with many of the protest movements claiming to fight for the same changes in Japanese government policy he espouses. Thus, much of his writing and his films must be viewed with the knowledge that he is placing himself outside of the system of protest in order to critique what is happening. He can do this because of his position as a well-established filmmaker—that he refuses to acknowledge his own privilege in his self-assurance as an “enlightened” critic of the Japanese response to the Vietnam War problematizes his films in that he is able to criticize the anti-war response, and those in an underprivileged position, without offering a solution of any feasible kind.

Additionally, Ōshima’s own writings, particularly when compared with the films he has made, are at times contradictory, aggrandizing, and occasionally incomprehensible. Thus, his writings provide a guide to reading his films and act as an introduction to the themes present within them; the writings themselves, however, due to their contradictory and biased nature, are secondary to the films and should only be read as a supporting frame to this analysis of his actual work.

Economic Poverty, Anti-Colonial Action, and Ōshima’s Cinematic Criticisms

Ōshima’s view of Korean and Japanese protesters, and his connections between Korea and Vietnam, become clearer upon viewing two films: his own *Diary of Yunbogi* (*Yunbogi no nikki*, 1965) and the Italo-Algerian film *The battle of Algiers* (*La battaglia di Algeri*, dir. Gillo Pontecorvo, 1966) as both films, and his subsequent commentary on them, illuminate his concurrent commentary on Vietnam, Korea, and Japan.

In narrative terms, *Diary of Yunbogi* is a fiction film, about young children on the streets of decrepit Korean towns forced to extreme measures for survival; however, its primary composition, entirely of still photographs Ōshima took while traveling through South Korea, provides a factual, experiential basis to the film, lending credence and weight to the stories being told of the Korean children. The film’s narration, told both from the perspective of the child Yunbogi in letters to his mother, and as a

third-person narrator telling Yunbogi of his life in the second-person, speaks of the same sort of trials Ōshima described in his Vietnam articles:

Narrator: Yi Yunbogi, you are a 10-year old Korean boy. Yi Yunbogi, you peddle gum in town. In Taegu, South Korea, you sell gum with your sister Summa. Your younger sister Summa is 8, your younger brother Yunshigi is 6, your second sister Tesuni is 5, and your father is ill. One stick of gum is 10 yen. You peddle gum into the night to get 30 or 40 yen.

[...]

Yubogi: I still remember the day when you [mother] left home. Your face was pretty. You must have been deeply hurt to leave us, your little children. At that time, my father did nothing but drink every day, and one day, he left for Seoul with a woman.

[...]

Narrator: In the marketplace, vendors sell a basket of potatoes, a bunch of grapes, a basket of persimmons or a plate of fish. Yi Yunbogi, where is your mother? Yi Yunbogi, where is your mother? Has she become a market vendor, or is she a maid in a house? (*Ōshima Yunbogi no nikki*)

This short film combines the still images of children in absolute poverty with dialogue explaining their lives to present a direct representation of what Ōshima described in Vietnam. Unlike his previous writings on Japanese protestors, these images served to emphasize the difficult poverty within Korea. The fact that, as Ōshima mentioned in his trip report from Korea, Korean cities were about ten years behind Japanese cities in terms of development, meant that images of children in poverty would, theoretically, still resonate with Japanese audiences who had witnessed the immediate post-war period. Using still images suggested a documentary-like quality, helping place the contents of the film closer to a documentation of history rather than a scripted, fictional narrative. These still images, in essence, help make the history of the story, one based on an actual diary by a South Korean boy, feel more real.

Additionally, the styles of narration throughout the film suggest a closer connection between the viewing audience and the personas narrating. Two types of narration appear: Yunbogi speaking to his mother, and an adult male, telling Yunbogi about his own life. Both of these narrators speak in the second person, where Yunbogi addresses his mother as “you”; the male narrator speaks to Yunbogi in the same manner.

Indirectly, the use of the second person also directs the narration to the audience as well, so that when the narrator describes to Yunbogi the poverty of Daegu, he is also speaking to the viewing audience, as if they are living in the Korean city as well.

But in this film, Ōshima does not directly link the suffering of the Korean populace to Japanese historical colonialism, or the current situation in Vietnam. Aside from the narrative structure of direct second-person reference, there is no immediate impact upon the Japanese viewer, no Japanese landscape, or Japanese individuals. *Yunbogi's Diary* is, at its heart, a film about Korean youth, rather than Japanese youth. It does, however, mark an important first step towards linking Japanese history in Korea with contemporary economic and social damage on the peninsula, and forcing empathy amongst Japanese viewers with people living through that damage.

What would eventually lead Ōshima to further refine his criticisms of left-wing Japanese political action, and the greater forces at play between the Japanese, Korean, and American governments, can also be seen in his reaction to a different post-colonial film, *The battle of Algiers*. His critique of it, and the subsequent critique of Japanese receptions of the film, parallels, in reverse, his own issues with the anti-Vietnam War movement in Japan, and his own interpretations of Japanese-Korean history.

One thing that can be gleaned from watching this film, however, is that it was made in a form that would obtain cooperation from the government. Which means that the government (that is, the present system) intended to make a film about the people's racial independence now. To what end I don't really know, but it is certain that it was to support the present system. Were the filmmakers in complete agreement with the government's intentions? Did they, too, make this film in support of the present system? I can't help feeling that the Algerian filmmakers had another intention. (Ōshima 1992, 142)

In many ways, Ōshima's interpretation of *The battle of Algiers* represents a film made by people who saw political action as a path towards liberation and happiness, but had certain, inexplicable, involvement from the Algerian government. This is the first of two important points which Ōshima makes with *The battle of Algiers*, both which relate to his criticism of anti-war Japanese and the fight against American (and Japanese) colonialism. The first is the failure to critique the system that helped create *The battle of Algiers*; an inability to hold adverse opinions,

even against the system allowing your existence, fails to establish an effective base from which to launch your opinions. In effect, *The battle of Algiers* only acknowledges the external torment, what is most convenient for those making the film; leaving out the current administration and its own mistakes leaves the film open for attack for bias. This criticism works differently for a film about an oppressed group, in comparison to Japanese protesters, who were raised in a country that was once an oppressor; nevertheless, this same criticism, it turns out, is one of the major problems with *Beheiren*, which Ōshima will attack in *A treatise on Japanese bawdy songs*.

The other point Ōshima wishes to make, however, relates to the greater purposes of the film; he states, “Why make a film just then about the people’s struggle for racial independence? [...] No film is made in isolation from the question of why it is being made now. There always has to be a purpose” (Ōshima 1992, 142). This is, in my view, the issue of historical connection; where Ōshima views *The battle of Algiers* as a film which fails to connect the means of its warfare with said warfare’s ultimate goal, his Korea/Vietnam films, *A treatise on Japanese bawdy songs* and *Three resurrected drunkards*, expose the connection between Japanese colonial involvement in Korea and Japanese/Korean anti-communist involvement in the Vietnam War, and the failure of the Japanese people to make that connection apparent and fight all government forces to sever the imperialist thread separating the people of each country from each other.

A Treatise on Japanese Bawdy Songs

A treatise on Japanese bawdy songs (hereafter *Bawdy songs*) begins with a university—entrance exams are taking place, and four high school boys, having finished, have gathered to share cigarettes. They have all become transfixed by a female student in their examination room, a woman whose name none of them know, just her seat number: 469. This is no mere high school romance; the four each want to sleep with her, or take her by force. As they flesh out their fantasies, they go for post-exam celebratory drinks with several of their female classmates (who they also attempt to sleep with) and their teacher Otake (Itami Jūzō). While they go out to drink, Otake teaches them a bawdy folk song, sung from a man’s perspective, about sleeping with various

village girls. At one point, he also describes a vast series of traditional folk songs, covering virtually the entire Japanese archipelago, including Okinawa (controlled by America at the time of the film).

The relationship between the students and this teacher forms, alongside the rape fantasy, the major storylines for the film. The teacher Otake carries divergent roles for his male and female students—as a ridiculous buffoon for the boys, and a noble mentor for the girls. Both are taken to extremes, where during their celebratory night after university exams, the girls take everything he says with utmost sincerity while the boys taunt him with silly sex jokes. The boys, in particular, ridicule him for seeing a woman named Tanigawa (later implied to be his fiancée, and played by Ōshima's wife, Koyama Akiko) and participating in a protest against Empire Day, a celebration of the imperial family line and an overt reference to a pre-WWII, nationalist Japan. The difference between the girls and boys regarding their teacher Otake translates into their meeting the next morning, when the girls discover that he has died in his sleep from a gas leak. The girls are in tears, while the boys don't seem to care, and even joke that they (the boys) killed Otake. What the boys don't realize, however, is that one of them, Nakamura (Araki Ichirō) did, in fact, kill their teacher—not by force, but by not intervening, discovering a gas leak and choosing not to fix it.

Nakamura's choice to let Otake die has been interpreted in a variety of ways, and this variation in opinion speaks to the difficulty of parsing out exact meanings from Ōshima's films. I would like to examine two opinions based on the crime and violence in this film and other Ōshima works, to explain the class, generational, and social differences between several characters in this film—social differences which Ōshima touches upon in his writings previously quoted, and which will appear in the form of national differences in *Three resurrected drunkards*.

The following interpretations, however, rest upon an understanding of a portion of the film from which it receives its title: the bawdy songs which are sung throughout. The subject matter of the song Otake teaches the students at their dinner is entirely about young boys sleeping with local women, and how best to accomplish that. This is not the only song included in the film, however; later on, after Otake has died, one of the girls, Kaneda Sachiko (Yoshida Hideko) sings a song from the perspective of a prostitute in World War II, as an example of a “women's song”. Additionally, in their search for 469, the boys (and Kaneda) attend

an anti-Vietnam War protest where numerous folk songs—mostly in English—are sung by a group of students. Each song represents a different social group, whose implications are critical to understanding the violence present in the film, and how this violence relates to Japan's relationship with Vietnam and Korea.

Returning to the death of Otake, according to Kawamura Ken'ichirō (2009), this action functions as part of a wider “killing by inaction” (*migoroshi*) effect which plays a major role in a number of violent acts throughout *Bawdy songs*, including Nakamura's failure to save Otake.

When Nakamura enters his high school teacher Otake's room and finds the gas stove knocked over, he notices that it is filling the room with carbon monoxide. By leaving Otake, drunk and passed out, in that state, Nakamura commits the crime of “killing by inaction”. This act, “killing by inaction”, is the ultimate moral axis for *Bawdy songs*. “Killing by inaction” is also what occurs later in the film, at the anti-war folk meeting, when fellow student Kaneda Sachiko is raped by protesters after singing her own song. This is an event run by [the male students'] object of desire, student Fujiwara Mayuko [469], and while Nakamura attends Otake's funeral, his three friends (Ueda, Hiroi, Maruyama) turn up at her event (to see her, not to participate). While they attempt to confess to Mayuko their fantasy, their classmate [Sachiko], who has joined them at the event, is raped by some of its participants. Thus, it is not only the three friends of Nakamura, but also the participants and Mayuko herself who, through this “death by inaction” commit the crime against [Sachiko]. (Kawamura, 310-11)³

Kawamura describes Nakamura's crime as a thread throughout the film indicating a lack of morals, where his crime is equated with the rape committed by the folk singers at the end of the film, and ultimately implicating 469 for failing to save Sachiko from the rape. In his reading of the film, the death of Otake and the subsequent rape of Kaneda implicate virtually every character in the film, all the way to 469. Ultimately, according to Kawamura, this killing by inaction extends to Japan and Vietnam, where 469's failure to save Sachiko despite hosting an anti-war event parallels Japan's failure to save Vietnam from violence despite its neighborly relationship and anti-war protestors present in the country.

This reading of *Bawdy songs* relates to a previous interpretation by Satō Tadao (1987), not specific to *Bawdy songs* but to several Ōshima

³ Translation mine.

films from the period. Satō describes the act of a crime as a “human liberation” (*ningen kaihō*) where the criminal act allows the individual to escape from the social systems imprisoning him (Satō 1987, 308). He cites this film and an earlier work, *Violence at noon* (*Hakuchū no Tōrima*) as examples of characters marginalized in society, whose violent acts are the subject of strong and forceful defences. *Violence at noon*’s plot and editing are constructed entirely around explaining a violent act in political and social terms; *I* is not quite as direct, but the violence in the film can be studied under Satō’s framework, with one addition: he does suppose the difficulty of judging violence as “human liberation” because the offender is not the only one involved. Also, Satō does question how the victim plays into this relationship of social oppression and violent reactions.

In *Bawdy songs*, however, the depiction of the students blurs the line between “criminal” and “victim”—several characters, including Nakamura and 469, exist in dual roles as both victims and criminals. That Nakamura could “kill” Otake and still be rendered as a victim is an argument Otake makes through the introduction of the bawdy songs which define the film, and where the faults in Japan’s left-wing groups begin to emerge. These faults emerge from their remembrance of Japanese history. One of the last lessons Otake teaches his students comes when he is very drunk, at a bar lined with traditional artwork on the walls:

Otake: Bawdy songs, raunchy songs, erotic songs, songs about sex—these are the suppressed voices of the people. An oppressed people’s labor, their lives, and their loves. Once people became conscious of these things, they naturally turned to song to express themselves. That’s why bawdy songs represent the history of the people. (Ōshima *Nihon shunka-kō*)

According to Otake, the bawdy songs represent a path and explanation for oppressed people’s existence on the planet. Otake’s students are implied to have come from a lower-class part of Japan, in direct contrast to the wealthier, urban 469. As part of their oppressed existence, the bawdy song provides a mythical history for them to help explain their situation. To understand the complexities of the bawdy song and how this relates to the history of Japan and Korea, Claude Lévi-Strauss (1978) explicates on myth and history:

The open character of history is secured by the innumerable ways according to which mythical cells, or explanatory cells which were originally mythical, can be arranged and rearranged. It shows us that by using the same material,

because it is a kind of common inheritance or common patrimony of all groups, of all clans, or of all lineages, one can nevertheless succeed in building up an original account for each of them. (17)

Lévi-Strauss is attempting to reconcile mythmaking with the actual recording of history, where various historical events can be explained by the same myths; essentially, how Otake and Nakamura interpret these same folk songs, and how various characters interpret their relationship to their nation's history, as people within Japan and as inheritors to Japan's colonial history. Otake's bawdy song, taught to his students as a liberation song from overt oppression does not remain with his male students in that form; instead, they change the lyrics to suit a rape fantasy, starting with their female classmates and ending with 469, the ultimate object of desire. As they sing about raping 469, they imagine telling her of their act by walking up to (their image of) her house, a house which becomes exponentially larger with each retelling, suggesting a strong class difference between her and the boys.

Providing the counterpoint to the boys' twisted "liberation" song, and ultimately connecting these songs with the protest movements against the Vietnam War, is Sachiko and her "women's song," written from the perspective of a prostitute in colonial Manchukuo. Sachiko sings with a Korean accent, implying that Sachiko is a *zainichi* Korean, culturally Japanese but a product of Japan's own colonial rape of the Korean peninsula. The first time she sings this song, Nakamura is awakened to his crime of negligence, in the death of Otake, as this is the first time he admits to it without a trace of irony or humor. From this point, Nakamura begins a strange sort of acceptance of his guilt, although it does not lead towards repentance (more on that later).

The second time Sachiko sings the women's song, it is at the folk song rally; after she is finished, several young women approach the boys and ask where they learned the song. Their questions reflect a complete ignorance of their own history, as Sachiko's accent and the subject matter of the song imply its origins, and the complicity of the WWII-era Japanese empire in its creation. Not long after this, she is picked up by a group of men and led out of the scene. She returns several minutes later, the victim of a group rape, almost as punishment for singing a song outside the bounds of the folk rally, where no song can implicate Japan in committing the same act as America in Vietnam. And as Kawamura states, the rape of Sachiko, although not a literal death, functions in a similar

way to the death of Otake, where 469 chooses not to intervene despite the fact that this rally is happening at her large, urban house (Nakamura's friends, at the very least, beat up the guys after discovering their deed).

Nakamura does not intervene in Otake's death, and 469 does not intervene in Sachiko's rape. These intentional failures to act—killing by inaction—play into the social distinctions between these groups of characters, based on class, gender, generational, and ultimately historical/political lines. For Nakamura to “kill” Otake after Otake has taught him a “liberation” folk song speaks to a generational gap between the two where Otake's teachings come off as nothing more than drunken ramblings. The male students say as much when Otake first teaches them the song; later in the film, Nakamura attends Otake's wake, where Otake's left-wing friends from his same generation bicker fecklessly over Otake's legacy to the point of absurdity in a parallel of *Night and fog in Japan*. Otake viewed himself as a teacher allied with “the people”, protesting the symbols of the Japanese government as seen in *Empire Day*, even if this self-perception did not carry through to Nakamura. Additionally, Nakamura and his friends, in imagining 469's rape, attempt to transgress this same social boundary, where they can exact revenge upon the more attractive, urban, wealthy 469: crimes of liberation, in Satō's words.

469's failure to save Sachiko, however, speaks to a different sort of class distinction, and a reminder of the social oppression Otake has attempted (unsuccessfully) to fight. This is because Sachiko's song, one from a rural, zainichi Korean, not only brings to light class distinctions present in 1960s Japan—the same kind Nakamura is rebelling against—but also historical crimes present in Japanese history, where Sachiko's life represents Japanese colonial oppression against Korea. The anti-war protestors sing songs devoid of Japanese history, and specifically deny the very sort of history they are “protesting” in their rally. Additionally, as wealthy males, they are implicit in the rape of Sachiko's family history, and when confronted with this history, seek to destroy it, even if they claim ignorance of said history. Thus, to save their position, they must end Sachiko, silencing her through the rape. 469's allegiance via class boundaries with these men prevents her from saving Sachiko, even though they share the same gender.

Their shared gender comes into play in the final sequence, where these various social barriers all emerge at once. This sequence, where 469

suggests the boys attempt to act out their rape fantasy, takes place in the test examination hall of the boys' rape fantasies, which has appeared in the film up to this point only as the location in a dream. As the boys attempt to rape 469 in this sequence, Otake's fiancée Tanigawa, who has appeared throughout the film attempting to extract Nakamura's motivations, steps into the classroom to lecture about the foundation myths of Korea and Japan. Her ultimate point: that Japan and Korea are founded by the same kings, and are thus the same people.

Her appeal to foundational myths as a way of saving 469 speak to the various social distinctions which have been appearing throughout. In this sequence, Tanigawa, from the same generation as Otake, cannot speak to the boys directly as she represents a generation they have already rejected. The boys, seeking liberation from their elders and from an oppressive, urban class, can reject her just as they reject 469. What these boys miss is the gender connection between Tanigawa, 469, and Sachiko, who remains silent but ever-present in the background of every shot in this sequence. Tanigawa and Sachiko have both been victims of sexual crimes, and in some sense wish to prevent the same against 469.

What is most important for Tanigawa, however, is the acknowledgment of a historical similarity between all the people in the film, one which has been forgotten: Japanese and Koreans emerged from the same people, and are thus the same—to fight is thus fratricidal and self-destructive. For the boys to rape and kill 469 is to commit the same crime against Sachiko's family, to repeat history, and to follow in the same steps of both the protestors raping Sachiko, and of the Japanese government by acting in Vietnam. The boys and 469's varying interpretations of their situation, Otake and Tanigawa's readings of history, and Sachiko's own family history become, as explicated by Lévi-Strauss, rearranged as one common thread.

In the last shot of the film, Nakamura kills 469. While 469's failure to save Sachiko suggests her death is one of liberation for the boys, the preceding speech by Tanigawa about their shared histories erases this "liberation"—469's death is not liberating, or even cathartic, and suggests a despair in repeating the same mistakes as before.

Ultimately, the extrapolation from violent sexual fantasy to violent act in the face of overwhelming (ideological) evidence against its necessity is of the same kind that Japan exacted against Korea in the colonial period, through 1945; Japan's participation in the American

excursion in Vietnam suggests that Japan (ie: its government officials) has not learned the appropriate lessons from the war, one of states fighting states over ideologies disconnected from the people, who remain perpetual victims.

Are the lessons of the colonial era forgotten, as seen by the folk singers/protesters, who violate Sachiko not realizing her song refers to that very history? Or, in opposition to that forgetting, is there a willful violence, an awareness of the history, and a refusal to stop its repetition? The film condemns both sides, but in my view seems to suggest the latter, in Nakamura's final act. This film does not suggest redemption and healing between Koreans and Japanese; instead, this possibility comes later, in another film about Japan, Korea, and Vietnam: *Three resurrected drunkards*.

Three Resurrected Drunkards

Three resurrected drunkards begins with a trek to the beach. Here we are introduced to the "heroes" of this dark tale, whose real names are never revealed; the actors are actually the band The Folk Crusaders, whose left-wing, anti-war music was popular at the time. The three go for a swim at the beach, leaving their clothes on a sand bank, where they are promptly stolen; cash and uniforms with labels in hangeul are left in their place. The students, upon returning to town, are accused of being illegal migrants from South Korea, are chased around town and into a bath house, where they meet a young woman who helps them out. Turns out, she is a communist-aligned Korean in Japan, acting as part of a Koreans in Japan support network to help them get from the coast to relatives or friends. Thinking the Folk Crusaders are actually the Korean refugees they've been forced to become, she helps them escape. Unfortunately, the three only run into the actual Koreans, the ones who took their clothes, and who are now trying to kill the three so that they can live in Japan without fear from the police. Thus, the three have to pretend to be Koreans to get help from a woman who might save them from being killed by two actual Koreans now pretending to be Japanese.

An important aspect in the relationship between the Folk Crusaders and the two Korean draft dodgers, named Yi Cheongil (a sergeant) and Kim Wan (a high school student) is that before the Folk Crusaders are killed, they must assume the identities of the draft dodgers, reciting name,

rank, and personal history, essentially becoming “Korean.” Even the third member, who cannot take the identity of an actual draft dodger, must change his nickname from “Beanpole” (a reference to his height) to “Korean Beanpole.” At first, this assumption of Korean identity is forced, done at gunpoint; later, the three will assume Korean identities out of their own free will.

However, what is also important to note from this sequence is how the demand placed upon the Folk Crusaders to assume Korean identities before being shot violates a principle established only a few sequences later: the impossibility of Koreans killing Koreans, as to do so is against their national identity. Immediately after this fact is established, a sequence of interviews with people on the street in Tokyo establishes what is to come, what is the essential purpose of this movie (and *Bawdy songs*)—that Japanese people are actually Korean, and, more specifically, the links between Japan and Korea are so intertwined that violence against one is violence against the other. That is due to the structure of the interviews, filmed in a method mimicking a documentary, where everyone on the street, despite speaking perfect Japanese, claims to be Korean. Eventually, the documentary style becomes overwhelmed by the audio of ever-repeating “I am a Korean [*kankokujin desu*]” to the point where the audio and video desync, before spilling back into the narrative—where the Folk Crusaders are shot in a train bathroom. However, this linkage between Japaneseness and Koreanness, and the blurring of lines between the two, plays extra importance throughout the second half of the film.

After the Folk Crusaders are killed, at exactly the halfway point of the film, the screen turns black, then reverts back to the original beach scene, with the same opening song: the film has, in essence, restarted. At first, this sequence appears to play exactly the same as the real opening of the film. What has changed, however, is that in this retelling of the story the Folk Crusaders retain awareness of the plot of the film, as if they had already lived through the first half. They remember their expected lines from the first version, and expect to repeat them the second time around, going so far as to virtually offer themselves to individuals searching for “strange individuals” (i.e. Koreans). The differences between the two halves of the film reveal the evolution in understanding between the Japanese and Korean characters.

That they accept the roles they were forced to inhabit the first time around is the point of the second half, the second “telling” of the film; these characters, no longer forced to “become” Koreans but choosing to do so as a part of their roles in the film, cross the boundary separating them as Japanese from their co-stars as “Koreans”. That they then fight for their “Koreanness”, demanding they be accepted as Koreans rather than Japanese, and the ease with which they are able to do so, speaks to an absurdity present in the labels “Korean” and “Japanese”. The absurdity is further emphasized throughout the end of the film, where Beanpole insists that the Folk Crusaders are, as always, Japanese—never Korean.

Of course, to say that the Folk Crusaders are “never” Korean means to deny them their proper ending, the death they share with the Korean draft dodgers. Death and murder play an important role throughout the film, as each character attempts to kill the others. This is most clearly seen in the constant repetition of an infamous Vietnam War photograph, where the South Vietnamese General Nguyen Ngoc Loan kills the North Vietnamese soldier Nguyen Van Lem. Virtually every character in the film is “executed” in a visual cue to this photograph, where they are shot by “Japaneses” and “Koreans” alike. One elongated sequence imagines the Folk Crusaders demanding Yi Cheongil to grimace like the victim in the photograph. At first, Yi doesn’t grimace enough, so they berate him until they get a reaction they like.

According to Kawamura, the death by inaction as seen in *Bawdy songs* is reversed in this film, whereby at some point, everyone kills everyone (Kawamura 2009, 320-21). What is important to note about these deaths is that, during the sequences where they imitate the Vietnam War photograph, nobody actually dies; it is just playing out a killing (*koroshiasobi*). Instead, characters die in much less glamorous ways; they are shot in train bathrooms, or while running away from a truck on the road. Only two characters actually die by replaying the famous photograph: Yi Cheongil and Kim Hwa, in the last moments of the film, in one of the rare moments the film takes on a serious tone.

These varying deaths point to the important role each character plays, whether they are Korean or “Korean” or Japanese or “Japanese” and how the others accept them in these roles. As mentioned earlier, for a Korean to kill another Korean is considered the worst possible action a Korean can take in this film, but by the 60-minute mark every character (speaking fluent Japanese) has switched between being either a Korean or

a Japanese so many times that keeping track of who is what nationality in any given moment is virtually impossible—one of the many jokes the film plays upon. By the end of the film, even the voice of “reason”, Beanpole, has declared himself to be a “Korean Beanpole”, negating his previous claim of them all being “just Japanese”.

This jumping back and forth between accepting the roles as “Koreans” and refusing them leads to the Folk Crusaders’ first death at the end of the first half of the film. The second half, however, leads to their unrelenting demand to be recognized as Koreans; in this acceptance of the role, they become one with their alter egos, taking on the names and identities of Yi Cheongil and Kim Wan. Thus, when the real Yi and Kim are executed photograph-style, the Folk Crusaders must die as well. The role-switching, and the death at the end of the film, leads to a breakdown in the meaning behind a national identity

The constant role-switching relates to the artificiality of the terms “Korean” and “Japanese,” particularly in Japan, where the *zainichi* Korean minority is in many ways indistinguishable from the Japanese majority in appearance and culture, a commonality suggested in both films. “Korean” and “Japanese” are not quite so much terms of absolute definition, but moldable, redefinable, and ultimately just labels to be tossed around or forgotten. While the constant back-and-forth between Koreans and Japanese is the most prominent example of this, the sequence in the middle of the film, a series of interviews that consist entirely of the exchange, “Are you Japanese?” “No, I am Korean,” exposes this meaning; one of those “Koreans” interviewed is the director himself.

The Folk Crusaders’ demands to be Korean also parallel the climax of *Bawdy songs*, where the main characters, all Japanese, are forced to confront their shared Korean histories. Both films end in tragedy for the Korean characters; however, while *Bawdy songs* ends with a rejection of this shared-nationality origin story in a violent death, in *Three resurrected drunkards*, there is at the very least an acknowledgment of the injustice against the Koreans—whose very injustice is an injustice upon Japanese people as well.

This artificiality of nationality is a common characteristic of not only *Three resurrected drunkards*, but in Ōshima’s other Vietnam/Korea-related films, *Double suicide* and *Death by hanging*. In *Double suicide*, the ending of the film is a deliberate rebuke of Japanese nationality, where the Japanese main characters align themselves with the anarchic

American assassin, in direct opposition to the Japanese government hunting him down. In *Death by hanging*, the main character's stereotyped "Koreanness," a stereotype laid upon him by the government staff administering his execution, become the motivation behind his murders; because he is defined as a Korean and discriminated for that reason, and because the Japanese government carries the guilt of colonial history against Korea, the main character *must* commit murder against those defined as aligned against the Japanese government. Even in *Bawdy songs*, the presence of competing creation myths as the definition of being "Japanese" suggest a similar pre-occupation with redefining nationality.

What I believe these four films suggest, then, is an opposition to the very notion of nationality, and specifically a notion of "Japanese" and "Korean" identity rigidly defined by the Japanese state. This can be seen in the background characters of *Three resurrected drunkards*; the only group of people who never stop being "Japanese," these characters almost always represent the government, are almost always played by the same actor (Tonoyama Taiji) and, like in the other three films about Koreans and Vietnam, act as the primary source of discrimination and opposition against the main characters, whether they be "Japanese" or "Korean." Every other character in the film, however, becomes Japanese or Korean—essentially, they have no nationality, and are just people, with artificial barriers to separate them, just like the students in *Bawdy songs*.

Liberation from Nationality on the Basis of History

Thus, in specific relation to the two films discussed in this paper, we can see that as viewed through Ōshima's films, Koreans and Japanese are, despite their differences, siblings, whose violent colonial history is being repeated in the Vietnam War, something the anti-war protesters in Japan fail to acknowledge. The violence of Japanese against Korean in the Sino-Japanese war, as Ōshima attempts to state in *Bawdy songs*, is one of sibling violence, as Japanese and Koreans are the same people, and a conscious forgetting of said history of siblinghood. In *Three resurrected drunkards*, this is taken one step further, where the line between Japanese and Korean seems to exist, but by the end of the film everyone has turned into one, as all are Korean and Japanese, and as one dies, the other dies as well. And just as Vietnamese committed violence against each other under the auspices of an American war, Koreans and Japanese, under that

same American umbrella, continue to commit violence against each other, and allow violence in Vietnam, as a repeat of their own history. Given the continuous political battles between the Japanese and South Korean governments in the present day over historical issues, the visions proposed by Ōshima in these films seem naive and outdated, and their failure to succeed is significant.

These films, however are also not about the failure of Japan to engage in creating “peace” in Vietnam—they are about Japan’s perpetuation of its colonial violence as a product of an artificial nationality, as it and (South) Korea provide assistance to the American violence in Vietnam. For Ōshima, Japan has not properly engaged with its imperial past, instead devoting itself entirely towards economic development; a future tense, but one which forgets the dangers of the past, now being repeated in Vietnam just as they had been in Korea. In this sense, as the Japanese violence was a violence against itself born out of a government-sponsored nationalist myth, the aide in violence against Vietnamese is a continuation of this prior domination of the people by the government. *Bawdy songs* lays the foundations for this premise, as the combination of foundational history and classic folk music connect Japanese and Korean history into one in direct opposition to a nationalist version, despite these alternative histories’ failures to reconcile each other and succeed as legitimate histories. *Three resurrected drunkards* brings the conflict into the contemporary period, setting Japanese against Korean not only as a product of history, but also as a side effect of the Vietnam War, repeating their history even as siblings fighting America’s war hand in hand; that they do not realize their folly, and continue to pursue violence against each other, and against Vietnam, only emphasizes the condemnation of forgetting their own history.

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