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*Japan and Asia: representations  
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# MUTUAL IMAGES

VOL. 4 – SPRING 2018

JAPAN AND ASIA: REPRESENTATIONS OF SELFNESS AND OTHERNESS

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# Japan and Korea in the mirror of Cinema: Selfness and Otherness between mutual understanding and recurrent nationalisms

Fabio Domenico PALUMBO (University of Messina, Italy)

## ABSTRACT

*The mutual representations and understanding of Korea and Japan can be approached by means of a socio-historical framing of the relationships between the two countries in the last decades, stemming from the tragic turmoil of World War II and the postcolonial heritage, including the 'comfort women' issue and the problems of the Korean minority in Japan, to the spreading of Japanese pop culture in South Korea and the 'Korean Wave' during the 1980s and the 1990s in Japan. Though nowadays resurgent nationalisms in both countries seem to highlight the limits of soft power in mutual acceptance, popular culture can be used as a privileged resource to investigate reciprocal representations between both societies. This paper aims to retrace the above-mentioned issues in a few selected recent Japanese and Korean movies, whose reception in Japan and Korea is connected to the audience sensitivity to the 'Self and Other' representations. The topic of the Korean minority in Japan is addressed through Hiroki Ryūichi's Sayonara Kabukichō (Kabukicho Love Hotel, 2014), partially shot on locations in Shin-Ōkubo, Tokyo's Korea Town. On the other hand, the rediscovery of Korea's colonial past, linked to the 'comfort women' issue, is seen through the lens of Choi Dong-hoon's Amsal (Assassination, 2015) and Cho Jung-rae's Kwihyang (Spirits' Homecoming, 2016). Japanese and Korean contemporary filmography seems to reflect people's present worries about a significant Other, geographically and historically linked to the Self, as well as to portray the ethnic and national identity rebuilding through a retelling of history.*

## KEYWORDS

Japan; Korea; Cinema; Postcolonialism; *Zainichi*; Korean Wave; Soft power; Nationalism.

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The mutual representations and understanding of Korea<sup>1</sup> and Japan can be approached by means of a socio-historical framing of the relationships between the two countries in the last decades. Such a preliminary overview provides a 'secure base' for an exploration on a media studies perspective of a number of popular culture<sup>2</sup> works

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<sup>1</sup> When writing 'Korea', the reference is, implicitly, to 'South Korea'. The division between North and South Korea occurred after World War II, after the end of Japanese rule over Korea (1910-1945).

<sup>2</sup> Even if the meaning of the terms 'pop' and 'popular' partially overlap, the term 'pop' refers more specifically to something containing qualities of mass appeal and is sometimes equated to mass culture (e.g. *kawaii* culture), while "popular" refers to what has reached popularity, regardless of its stylistic traits. In this study the two terms are used more or less interchangeably. See also Storey (2006).

offering examples of reciprocal representations between Korean and Japanese societies. In a context of globalisation, where cultures are more and more connected, media works and processes definitely influence people's mutual understanding and value-orientation. Following Bourdieu (1979), there is indeed a tight link between aesthetic dispositions and social aspects.

Though nowadays resurgent nationalisms in both countries seem to highlight the limits of soft power<sup>3</sup> (Hayashi and Lee, 2007) in mutual acceptance, popular culture can be used as a privileged resource to investigate reciprocal representations between Korea and Japan. In the following pages I will firstly outline the historical framework of the relationship between the two countries from colonisation to World War II. Secondly, I will examine, on the one hand, the influence of Japanese popular culture in Korea, on the other hand, the phenomenon of the 'Korean Wave' in Japan. In this regard, I will discuss soft power potential and limits in determining mutual perceptions between Korea and Japan. Finally, I will consider a few recent Japanese and Korean movies, whose reception in Japan and Korea is connected to the audience's images of Self and Other. The topic of the Korean minority in Japan will be addressed through Hiroki Ryūichi's *Sayonara Kabukichō* (*Kabukicho Love Hotel*, 2014), whilst the rediscovery of Korea's colonial past will be seen through the lens of Choi Dong-hoon's *Amsal* (*Assassination*, 2015) and Cho Jung-rae's *Kwihyang* (*Spirits' Homecoming*, 2016). These movies have been selected because of their specific relevance in relation to three aspects of Japan-Korea relations which I consider extremely significant with regard to the mutual representation of the two countries: the *Zainichi* (Korean residents in Japan) condition, the Japanese rule of Korea from 1910 to 1945 and the 'comfort women' issue. Other Korean and Japanese movies could surely be useful for this purpose and I will make a quick reference to some of them in this paper, but I will extensively discuss the three I have selected because of their vivid representation of the above mentioned aspects.

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<sup>3</sup> A country's 'soft power', according to Nye (1990), is the ability to attract and influence another country by using culture, political values and foreign politics. Whilst Nye has used the notion particularly with respect to America, which dominated the world culturally, politically and economically in the immediate post-World War II, several scholars have considered soft power in Asia, where Japan has played a leading role thanks to its imperialist past (see Iwabuchi, 2002).

## Japan and Korea from Colonisation to World War II

The unavoidable premises to further considerations are the Japanese rule of Korea from 1910 to 1945 and the tragic turmoil of World War II with its postcolonial heritage, including the 'comfort women' issue and the problems of the Korean minority in Japan. This is the historical background of the above mentioned conflicting nationalisms, representing the counterpart of the spreading of Japanese pop culture<sup>4</sup> in South Korea and the 'Korean Wave' during the 1980s and the 1990s in Japan.

Korea's involvement with Japan in modern times must be dated back to the First Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895), mostly fought on Korean soil. With the turn of the twentieth century, Korea was formally annexed to the Empire of Japan (1910); during the Japanese domination, the country underwent drastic and significant changes, which affected politics, economy and culture. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were crucial for the rebuilding of Korean national consciousness amid the colonial ambitions of China and Japan, also thanks to the role of newspapers (Schmid, 2002) and literature (Zur, 2016), which followed and shaped the process of social transformations during modern (and contemporary) history.

The colonisation of Korea marked the end of the Joseon dynasty, which lasted for about five centuries, starting from 1392. Early Japanese colonialism in Korean peninsula was characterised by the military rule (1910-1919) of General Masatake Terauchi, the first Governor-General of Korea. Occupation forces controlled politics, education, morals, public welfare and tax collection, generating an early nationalistic movement among Korean people, which led to riots severely repressed by the occupants. In 1910 there was a massive round-up of nationalists due to an alleged plot to assassinate Terauchi<sup>5</sup>. During his rule, Terauchi had prohibited "meetings, closed newspapers and ordered burned over 200,000 books" containing information on Korean history and geography as well as "free-thinking modern ideas". By 1918, over 200,000 Koreans had been "labelled rebellious, arrested and tortured" (Kang, 2013). The concept of 'nation' (*minjok*) was first used within an editorial of Seoul's gazette, *Hwangsong sinmun*, on January the 12<sup>th</sup>, 1900. This ethnic concept of nation was linked to the old myth of

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<sup>4</sup> Japanese popular culture encompasses cinema, *anime*, *manga*, videogames, TV-shows, music, cuisine, and so on. It is one of the leading and most widespread popular cultures in the world.

<sup>5</sup> See: Early Colonialism and Rise of Korean Nationalism and Identity 1910-1919. *The University of British Columbia - Department of History* [Online] Available from: [http://www.history.ubc.ca/sites/default/files/courses/lectures/%5Brealname%5D/early\\_colonialism\\_and\\_rise\\_of\\_korean\\_nationalism\\_1910-1919.pdf](http://www.history.ubc.ca/sites/default/files/courses/lectures/%5Brealname%5D/early_colonialism_and_rise_of_korean_nationalism_1910-1919.pdf) [Accessed 15 May 2017]

Tan'gun, the progenitor of Korean people. "Traditional armed resistance faded by 1913, but invoking Woodrow Wilson's principle of self-determination, the Koreans surprised their masters with two Declarations of Independence in February and March, 1919", which opened the way to a nation-wide civil-disobedience movement (Wells, 1979). Though the rebellion was repressed by the Japanese forces, it marked the beginning of the Korean separatist movement, which lasted at least until Sino-Japanese War. Despite their divisions, the Korean nationalists endured their actions in country and abroad (China, Manchuria), addressing the social, political and ideological issues of the colonial situation (*ibid.*). Despite the fact that "in the last decade of the colonial period, colonial authorities pursued a policy of forced assimilation under the banner of *Naisen Ittai* (Interior [Japan] and Korea as one body)" (Em, 2001), this slogan highlights the ambivalence of Japan's attitude towards the occupied Korea: how can the outside (Korea) become one with a pre-existing interior (Japan) (*ibid.*)?

According to Em, the Japanese conservative discourse in the post-colonial era insisted on a reassuring view of the colonial past: following this narrative, Japan only attempted to "drive out Western colonial powers from Asia", and "colonial rule had ushered Korea into the modern age and that many Koreans had actively supported the Japanese colonial government and the goal of expanding Japan's empire" (*ibid.*). Furthermore, in Japanese neo-nationalist discourse, the Japanese occupation of Korea is presented "as a case of annexation (as opposed to colonisation)" (Caprio, 2010). On the other hand, in South-Korea, during the Cold War, the problem of collaboration was avoided by the anti-communist historiography, while dissidents criticised the role of the propertied classes for their collusion with the Japanese authorities. "In democratic South Korea the unresolved grievances of the colonial past have become exceptionally politicised in ways that have undermined bilateral relations in significant ways" (Porteux, 2016).

The colonial regime was characterised by a massive exploitation of Korean resources and workers (Suh, 1978), and a harsh racial discrimination. Hundred of thousands of male workers were conscripted by Japanese industry and forcedly sent to Japan, particularly during World War II (Weiner, 1998), adding to the equally large number of spontaneous immigrants during the early years of Japanese colonisation; "in 1940 the population of Koreans living in Japan exceeded 1 million" (Nozaki, Inokuchi and Kim, 2006, 2). Conversely, many Japanese merchants settled in Korea in search of economic chances, mainly land ownership (Kang, 2013). Next to the forced labourers issue, during World War II thousands of women



from the colonies (between 100,000 and 200,000 according to the International Commission of Jurists, 1994) were forced into sexual slavery in Japanese military brothels ('comfort women'). The latter included an unknown number of Korean women (Bruce, 1997, 155; Hicks, 1996, 312). According to the NGO-led *Women's International War Crimes Tribunal* (2000), the 'comfort women' were one of the greatest unacknowledged injustices of WWII<sup>6</sup>. The issue of the 'comfort women' has been recently interpreted in terms of a 'double bind' between Japanese colonialism and Korean patriarchy, in the cases of women forced to sexual slavery after fleeing sexual abuse at home, or of victims press-ganged to prostitution with the help of Korean procurers (Soh, 2008). The recent history shows that the 'comfort women' issue is still an open wound in the bilateral relationships: "In 1995 the Japanese government helped establish the Asia Women's Fund to provide compensation for the former comfort women, but civil society organisations in South Korea opposed this gesture of atonement because it did not admit state responsibility for the comfort women system. In 2011 the Constitutional Court ruled that the government had violated the rights of former comfort women by not pressing Japan to take state responsibility and provide redress, thereby forcing the most pro-Japanese government since Park Chung-hee to aggressively pursue the matter" (Porteux, 2016). In December 2015 "the Japanese government agreed to pay \$8.7 million to dozens of Korean women who were forced to become prostitutes serving Japanese soldiers" (Chelala, 2015, n.p.). The payment started a few months later: "Of the 46 former comfort women who were alive as of Dec. 28, 2015, when the two governments announced the landmark agreement to solve the comfort women issue, 29 of them or their families have expressed their willingness to receive the grants. Six of the 46 have died since the agreement" (The Japan Times, 2016, n.p.). This did not settle the issue, because "Japan apologized and compensated for the general suffering of the comfort women, but not for the specific act of forcible enslavement [for which Japan cites lack of evidence]. Until this happens, Korean protesters consider any apology incomplete" (Yi, 2017, n.p.). In December 2016, a South Korean citizen group provocatively erected a statue in memory of the 'comfort women' in front of the Japanese Consulate in Busan, which resulted in a three-month-long absence of the Japanese ambassador to South Korea. Nagamine's return was accompanied by the public dismay of the noted Japanese novelist Tsutsui Yasutaka (author of the sci-fi

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<sup>6</sup> The transcript of oral judgment delivered on 4 December 2001 by the Judges of the Women's International War Crimes Tribunal on Japan's Military Sexual Slavery is available from: <http://www.iccwomen.org/wigjdraft1/Archives/oldWCGJ/tokyo/summary.html> [Accessed 15 May 2017]

novel *Toki o Kakeru Shōjo* [*The Girl Who Leapt Through Time*]), who had blogged derogatory comments about the statue (Osaki, 2017, n.p.).

The category of ‘double bind’ can be used again to describe relationships between Japan and Korea during the colonial period. Borrowing the terms Hascom (2013, 55) used in literary criticism about Korean writers during Japanese rule, the colonial narrative is essentially ‘split’, causing a ‘double bind’ between the drive to assimilation and the persisting difference of the colonised. In other words, the ‘colonial intimacies’ between rulers and ruled are basically contradictory (Kwon, 2015, 15). Still, it is possible to argue that these bind and intimacies endured after the turmoil of the second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945), the Pacific War (1941-1945), the surrender of Japan, and the end of the colonial era at the conclusion of World War II, mark the mutual perception and understanding of the two countries until contemporary days.

After the end of WWII, there “were two intertwined issues: the repatriation of Koreans from the Japanese archipelago to the Korean peninsula and the legal status of Koreans remaining in Japan, specifically, their nationality/citizenship. A massive wave of repatriation of Koreans living in Japan took place within a very short period of time. [...] In 1952, the number of Korean residents was slightly more than 535,000” (Nozaki, Inokuchi and Kim, 2006, 2, 4).

Repatriation was only one side of the coin. The Korean residents in Japan were deprived of Japanese citizenship and civil rights, having been categorised as foreign residents (*zairyu gaikokujin*). The condition of the Korean residents in Japan, the *Zainichiron*, is still a political issue in Japan: *Zainichi* (literally “present in Japan”) is used for the permanent ethnic Korean residents in Japan tracing their roots to the colonial period, distinguished from the ‘newcomer’ Korean migrants who have come to Japan mostly since the mid 1980s (Hester, 2008, 145). Some of the permanent ethnic Korean residents in Japan acquired Japanese nationality; one of the terms more commonly used to emphasise their double belonging (they are ethnically Korean but they are Japanese citizens) is *Nihonseki Chōsenjin* (146), i.e. “Korean with Japanese nationality”. This term is in competition with *Kankoku-kei Nihonjin*, or “Korean-Japanese”, where Japanese is not to be intended as an ethnic descent, rather as a civil-political category (*ibid.*). We will address again the topic of the Korean minority in Japan further on, while considering Hiroki Ryūichi’s *Sayonara Kabukichō*.

### Japan's Pop Culture in Korea: From Colonial Power to 'Soft Power'

It is possible to affirm that in the post-war period there was a shift in Japanese foreign politics and diplomacy in Asia from colonial power to 'soft power' (Nye, 1990, 2004), as Otmazgin (2013) asserted<sup>7</sup>. The worldwide diffusion of Japanese pop culture since the mid-1980s combined with the fascination it exerted over European, American, and, in first instance, East Asian audiences made clear to the Japanese government the significance of 'soft power' in terms of diplomatic and economical relationships with foreign countries. Soft power can be an effective way to gently achieve important geopolitical goals in a globalised context, where cultures stand as a vehicle of global influence through the process of transnational cultural consumption (Appadurai, 1996). As Befu (2001) affirmed, "in addition to the West there is at least one other centre of globalisation in this world, namely Japan" (4).

On the basis of these considerations, the role of cultural power cannot be underestimated. Rather, the debate is still open about the 'Japanization' phenomenon and the value of the spread of Japanese pop culture in other countries (for our purposes, specifically in Asia). Igarashi (1997) does not associate 'Japanization' to a specific Japanese cultural influence, arguing that the success of Japan's pop culture must be conceived in terms of consumerism and "materialistic cultural dissemination" (6). This somehow recalls Azuma Hiroki's view about the animalistic trait of the cultural consumption within the *otaku* subculture (2001)<sup>8</sup>. On the other hand, scholars as Iwabuchi (2002) do not "dismiss the pervasiveness of Japanese influence", emphasising the re-centring and de-centring of power structures as "cultural imperialism" to the benefit of "vitalized local practices of appropriation and consumption of foreign cultural products and meanings" (35).

When considering contemporary "cultural invasion", it is evident that Japanese political influence took advantage of its historical legacy of colonisation in Asia, and one must not forget that in Korea and Taiwan "the number of people who speak Japanese [...] is by far the largest in the world" (125). Actually, the penetration of Japan's pop culture throughout East Asia was not so easy, and this represents the detrimental heritage of the colonial period. Until recently, "Japanese films, TV programs and music had been totally banned" (86); the ban on Japanese media broadcasting was removed in Taiwan in 1993,

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<sup>7</sup> This was also the topic of some recent lectures by the same Nissim Otmazgin (2016).

<sup>8</sup> One must consider that the reference to Azuma when considering foreign people (e.g. Korean youth) Japanese pop culture is acceptable only once the necessary changes in terms of context have been made.

and the process of abolishing restrictions on importing Japanese cultural products started in South Korea in 1998 (218 n. 10)<sup>9</sup>. At any rate, Japanese pop culture was gradually absorbed in countries like Taiwan, Hong Kong, Thailand, and South Korea in the 1980s through dynamics of imitation (Ching, 1994) and cross-cultural hybridisation (e.g. idol groups made of Japanese and Koreans) (Iwabuchi 2002, 207).

Some researchers have considered the appreciation of Japanese pop culture in Far East countries as part of a progressive process of community building in the East Asian region (Katsumata, 2012). Otmazgin (2008a) stated that the recently created Japanese cultural markets in East and Southeast Asia must be framed within a regional paradigm, in terms of cultural flows, regional economic inter-penetration and cultural confluences of popular cultures, particularly American, Japanese, Chinese, and Korean ones.

Focusing over Japan and Korea, an effective use of confluences and multilateral cultural flows for promoting diplomacy was the co-hosted FIFA World Cup 2002, or TV co-productions as the serialised drama *Furenzu (Friends, 2002)*, a love story between a Korean man and a Japanese woman, which drew a large audience from both countries (Iwabuchi 2002, 207). In 2000, the Korean film *Shiri (Swiri, 1999)* had attracted one million viewers in Japan, and the same had happened in Korea with the Japanese movie *Rabu retā (Love Letter, 1995)* (*ibid.*). Still, Korean respondents to surveys conducted in 1995 and 2000 showed a strong resistance to the spread of Japanese pop culture and to the abolition of the restrictions on importations of Japan's pop culture products, in a spirit of cultural protectionism (221, n. 11). Nevertheless, children who grew up after the ban on Japanese cultural products was lifted became consumers of Japanese pop culture (cosplay, *manga*, *anime*, etc.). South Korean drama based on Japanese pop culture works, such as *Kkotboda namja (Boys Over Flowers, 2009)*, based on the *shōjo manga Hana Yori Dango*, *Naeil's Cantabile (2014)*, based on the *josei manga Nodame Cantabile*, *Jangnanseureon Kiseu (Playful kiss, 2010)*, based on the *shōjo manga Itazura no Kiss*, gradually surged in number (see also Teramura, 2008). Already in 2008 the consumers' demand for Japanese pop culture products had significantly raised, with the market of Japanese *manga* worth 4 trillion won and the main actor of *Kkotboda namja* being the country's most sought-after celebrity (Chung, 2009).

Recently, resurging nationalisms and political disputes between Japan and Korea over the Dokdo/Takeshima islets, as well as the drop of the strength of Japanese yen,

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<sup>9</sup> On this point, see also Kirk (2000).

which discourages import, are triggering a competition, if not a 'culture war', between *Hallyu* (or "Korean Wave") and 'Cool Japan' (Choi, 2004)<sup>10</sup>. Is the 'Asian century' going to be dominated by Japan's model of development and its social organisation, or is the Korean paradigm offering a more reassuring and charming paradigm?

### **The Korean Wave in Japan**

The Korean Wave signifies the increasing popularity of South Korean culture since the 1990s, starting from East and Southeast Asia and progressively developing into a global phenomenon. We will look closer to the image of Korea within the Japanese audience, or, in other words, to the Japanese discourse on Korea (*Kankoku-ron*). As Yamanaka (2010) suggested, 'ignorance' is a key expression in tracing the genealogy of popular representations of Korea in Japan from the late 1980s to the first year of this century. This was particularly evident in the analysis of the reception in Japan of the k-drama *Gyeo-ul yeon-ga* (*Winter Sonata*, 2002, broadcasted in Japan in 2003); Hayashi (2005, 201-202) claimed that the lack of realistic notions about Korea by the Japanese (mainly female) audience allowed the latter to invent a Korea of their own. In this sense, it can be useful to attempt a short history of the relationship between the Japanese public and Korea, in order to unveil the historic legacy of colonisation, in a sort of 'return of the repressed'. Following Yamanaka, what the Japanese affirm they don't know is something they should know.

Atkins (2010) pointed out that the 'Korean Wave' of the last decade is not a novelty. Actually, the first 'K-Wave' dates back to the Japanese colonisation of Korea. Koreans were then conceived by Japanese colonisers as 'primitives'<sup>11</sup>, in an ambiguous mixture of idealisation and devaluation. After the defeat in World War II and the withdrawal from the Peninsula, there was a long hiatus in Japan's appeal towards Korea. A significant interest in Korean culture emerged again in Japan in the 1980s. According to Chung (1995, 18), 1984 can be considered the beginning of an increasing interest in Korea among Japanese people, in view of 1988 Summer Olympics, which were to be held in Seoul. Up until then, Japanese concern about Korea had been focused over the

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<sup>10</sup> On this ongoing 'cultural war', see also: Beyond Hallyu (2013).

<sup>11</sup> With 19th-century modernisation, Japan adopted the way of *Wakon-yōsai* ("Japanese spirit and Western techniques"), trying to reach the technological level of Western powers, whilst applying to the East Asian countries and to its neighbours with a sort of Orientalist attitude, in the sense of Said (1978). This is remarkable if one considers that Japan is a more 'eastern' country than Korea, geographically speaking. See also Bellah (2003).

democratisation process, particularly during the 1970s under Park Chung-hee government. After Korean democratisation at the end of the 1980s, “movements of people, goods and information between Japan and Korea became increasingly bi-directional” (Yamanaka, 2010). During the 1990s Korean popular culture (TV-dramas, K-pop, cinema) started to become popular in East Asia, Japan included, also thanks to Korean government support (Tuk, 2012).

At the peak of this process, *Hallyu* (or *Hanryu* in Japanese), the ‘Korean Wave’, established itself as a cultural consumption trend in Japan after the broadcasting of *Gyeoul yeon-ga* from April 2003. “The number of Japanese who travelled to Korea in 2004 recorded a growth of 35.5 percent compared to the previous year” (Hirata, 2008). As Yamanaka summarised, Japanese attraction towards Korea took two directions: a trend, mainly limited to younger people, “towards consumption of Korean cultural commodities”, similarly to the Japanese audience’s interest in Hong Kong movies and stars during the 1980s; and a “fascination with the image of the Self (Japan) as seen by the Other (Korea)”, including Korean anti-Japanese nationalist discourse as shown in entertainment and pop culture products.

In 2005, the *manga* by Yamano Sharin *Manga Kenkanryū (Hating the Korean Wave, 2005-09)*, a polemical story about Korean nationalism, can be taken as a sample of the ‘anti-Korean Wave’ which on the other hand affected Japanese society. Again, in August 2010, six thousand people “demonstrated against Fuji TV, because they were ‘airing too many Korean dramas’. The catalyst for this protest was the firing of the Japanese actor Takaoka Sosuke from his agency after he criticised the Korean wave publicly through his twitter account” (Kozhakhmetova, 2012; see also Hicap, 2011).

Nevertheless, in this phase “exchange between Japan and Korea is unprecedented in its bilateral and continuous nature [...] Japan’s Korea boom not only promoted the circulation and consumption of media products, but generated a desire to know the background of media products” (Yamanaka, 2010). Again, the diffusion of Korean pop culture in East Asia since late 1990s has challenged the dominant paradigm of cultural globalisation, usually conceived in terms of cultural imperialism (Shibata, 2013). Differently, the spread of the Korean Wave “can be considered as a manifestation of cultural hybridity, a new form of ‘Asian modernity’ that challenges the domination of Western cultural imperialism” (118). Korean cultural hybridity is a carrier for traditional values which are enthusiastically received as a model for Asian modernity. This,



according to Shibata, explains the appeal of Korean dramas, imbued with traditional Asian values, in Taiwan, Hong Kong, China, and Japan (again, see the case of *Gyeo-ul yeon-ga*). The ‘cultural proximity’ principle is a crucial factor in explanation of the Korean Wave (*ibid.*): nations of a same area, sharing languages, values, history and culture, can appreciate TV programs, music, comics, which they perceive close to their cultural codes (Straubhaar, 1991).

### **Soft power potential and limits in mutual perception between Korea and Japan**

As previously mentioned, according to many observers, soft power plays a role in the building of a regional community in East Asia. Particularly, Yasumoto (2009) seems quite optimistic about the role of Japan and Korea as sources of media and cultural capital: “The growth in cultural flows between the countries, despite historical antipathy, is creating a new cultural geography” (311). Yasumoto (2016) goes further, affirming that popular culture can contribute to boosting ties and harmony in East Asia, even to healing historical wounds and “instilling mutual respect and understanding”. Despite persisting and recurring political issues, according to Yasumoto popular culture can establish “a new form of citizenship, where the commonality of enjoyment of content transcends politics” (*ibid.*). This vision assumes a relationship between consumer and citizen, which is problematic on a number of points, but this is not the right place to discuss the matter.

Desideri (2013) is more pessimistic about the soft power potential in boosting harmony in East Asia, analysing the perception of Japan by the neighbour countries. To be honest, many doubts have been advanced about soft power value in general, apart from the Japanese case (for an overview of the opposite views about soft power and a critical approach to its value, see Yukaruç, 2017). Desideri admits that Japan has become an international cultural powerhouse, but contends that the “spread of Japanese cultural products offered the country incredible levels of cultural influence, but it could not translate its new cultural capital into political power” (47). Thanks to Japanese government’s efforts, Japan is trying to foster a positive image of itself through cultural products. “By marketing its products as embodying long-held Japanese cultural values like harmony, compassion, and coexistence, Japan creates a paradox that highlights the impotence of its soft power policy” (48). Asian citizens of South Korea and China inter-

viewed for a pan-Asian poll (Otmazgin, 2008b, 95-96), for instance, though appreciating Japanese cultural products, reflected critically upon Japan's wartime responsibilities (Desideri, 2013, 48-49). A recent study of the U.S. think tank Pew "found the three countries mostly have negative views of one another, which are reinforced by cultural depictions — China and Korea want to see Japan as a villain, while Japan wants to feel like it didn't do anything too bad in the conflict" (St. Michel, 2015, n.p.).

Desideri reckons that South Korea, also by means of public aid of the Korean Creative Content Agency (KOCCA), which helps the entertainment industries in the spread of *Hallyu*, is profiting more than Japan of its increasing soft power, not only because Korean products are less expensive than Japanese ones to the average consumer (Sung, 2008, 14), but also because of historical differences between the two countries. "The first and most important difference between *Hallyu* and Cool Japan is that South Korea's lack of historical baggage facilitates easier 'attraction' between messenger and receiver. The regional image South Korea must change is far less severe than Japan's" (Desideri, 2013, 52). This means that Asian audiences can more easily reshape the image of Korea with respect to a past of economic underdevelopment than the colonial and imperialistic legacy of Japan (see Armstrong 2008, 156-157). For instance, the consumption of Korean dramas made Japanese (and Asian) viewers reconsider their understanding of Korean history (Mori, 2008, 130). As already mentioned, East Asian consumers also consider South Korean products as more 'Asian' than Japanese ones, because of the westernisation of Japan accelerated by post-World War II reconstruction (Desideri, 2013, 35).

This strategic advantage of Korea over Japan in the Asian context can be approached by a different point of view in terms of gender issues and cultural consumption (Mori, 2008, 141). "*Hallyu* fandom motivated women to spend money on their own desires. For example, traveling to popular K-drama filming sites, which East Asian women have started doing *en masse*, represents a form of female financial independence previously unseen in the region. [...] Women from Japan, China, Thailand, Taiwan, and other countries then form transnational relationships based on these shared consumer tastes. *Hallyu* has homogenized regional consumer cultural consumption" (Desideri, 2008, 55). This lets us consider the other side of the coin: if Japanese pop culture finds resistance in East Asia at the level of changing people's view about Japan as a country, Korean pop



culture's spread, apart from the anti-Korean Wave recent phenomenon, seems to encounter as well some resistance in the media discourse. For instance, the popularity of *Gyeo-ul yeon-ga* or the whole 'Korean Wave' was reduced to the image of middle-aged female fans seeking romance stories and good-looking actors (Hayashi and Lee, 2007). This underestimated the meaning of the cultural practices performed by Japanese women reaching across borders to Japan's former colony, reducing Japanese female fandom of Korean drama to a stereotyped representation (*ibid.*). Indeed, the "show's [*Gyeo-ul yeon-ga*] popularity in Japan was surprising to many, including the producer Yoon Suk-ho and then-Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, who in 2004 famously said, 'Bae Yong-joon is more popular than I am in Japan'" (Korea Herald, 2011, n.p.). Furthermore,

In 2003 - the first year this drama was introduced to Japanese audience, NHK, Japan's national public broadcasting organization, hurriedly aired *Winter Sonata* twice due to explosive popularity, then re-aired a third time in mid-2004. Due to viewers' demand, the drama had been re-broadcast at least thirteen times across different channels in Japan, and had been watched by two-thirds of Japanese households. (PrKorea, 2012, n.p.)

### **Japan and Korea in the mirror of Cinema**

I have started my analysis of the mutual representation and understanding of Korea and Japan by citing the newspapers published during the Japanese rule over Korea, then proceeded to evaluate the reception of Korean dramas by Japanese audiences. Now I will shift to the medium of cinema, a few recent Korean and Japanese movies being the focal point of this case study. In any case, I want to highlight how my method must be considered accurate for all the media I have addressed, because I have always stressed the relationship between the medium and the self-/other- images of Korea and Japan in terms of public discourse. Moreover, as for the connection between the topics I am considering in this paper, the reader must keep in mind that both the colonial past and the reciprocal influence between Korea and Japan, in terms of popular culture, define the context behind the media representation of Japan-Korea relations. Last century's colonial heritage and nowadays' 'culture war' intertwine and contribute to mutual understanding and misunderstanding between the two countries, casting new light upon historical and contemporary issues such as the condition of Korean minority in Japan and the tragedy of the so called 'comfort women'.

☞ *Zainichi* condition in the mirror of a Japanese movie

The question of ethnic identity of the Korean minority in Japan involves the process of self-representations and other-representations<sup>12</sup>, i.e. the perception of Korean residents in Japan by the same Korean minority and by the Japanese population. Visočnik (2013) researched this issue in the general framework of multiculturalism in Japanese society. As highlighted by Visočnik, Koichi (2005, 55) points out that “no nation is pure or homogeneous in terms of race, ethnicity and culture”, and there are many ethnically marginalised communities in Japan, both migrant and indigenous, but

Koreans constitute the largest ‘foreign’ community permanently residing in Japan. Despite their similarities in physical appearance and considerable acculturation to mainstream Japanese society, Koreans in Japan have been discriminated against by both the Japanese state and Japanese society. (Visočnik, 2013, 114)

Therefore, presence of ethnic Korean residents in Japan challenges the notion of a ‘homogeneous’ Japan (Macdonald 1995, 296; Chapman, 2008). The homogeneity of Japan is indeed challenged at many levels, considered the presence in Japan of Chinese, Filipinos, Brazilians of Japanese descent or Japanese of Brazilian descent, etc. (Norimitsu, 2008). Visočnik (2013) underlines that post-World War II nationalist discourse on Japanese uniqueness (*nihonjinron*) implied the denial of the existence of minorities in Japan (115), in other words the concept of Japanese mono-ethnicity (Lie, 2005). Nevertheless, “multi-ethnicity continued to be the social reality in post-war Japan, since former colonial subjects like Koreans still lived in Japan” (Visočnik, 2013, 115). The linguistic controversial between *zainichi kankokuchōsenjin* (“resident South and North Koreans in Japan”) and “Korean-Japanese” was already mentioned; the hyphen between Korean and Japanese implies hybridisation, and this obviously clashes with the concept of mono-ethnicity.

The stigmatisation of Korean minority entails a linguistic shift of the term *Chōsenjin* (“Koreans”), linked to *Chōsen*, the name of an ancient Korean state which the Japanese colonial government used to indicate the annexed Peninsula. *Chōsenjin* was originally neutral but, during the colonial period, it “took on the connotation of inferiority

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<sup>12</sup> The ideological construction of Self and Other boosts positive self-representation and negative other-representations because of the operating self-serving bias (van Dijk, 1998). Furthermore, intergroup relations are marked by in-group favouritism (Billig and Tajfel, 1973).

through the Japanese media reports” (117). Post-war Japan was characterised by media correctness (censorship of discriminatory language) in a sort of attempt of coping with colonial heritage (*ibid.*). Still, ethnic discrimination against Korean minority in Japan “exists on a societal level, from governmental discourse down to the everyday life of ordinary citizens” (119) and, obviously, media discourse.

On the side of self-representations of the Korean minority in Japan, most *zainichi* experience a conflictual situation with regard to their identity. Indeed, attachment to the homeland of older generations conflicts with the representation of Korean expats in Korea, since Koreans of the ‘diaspora’ are considered as inauthentic if not traitors. Moreover, one must consider the issue of the two Koreas, and the fact that third and fourth generation Koreans were born in Japan and are native Japanese speakers. Korean minorities in Japan are a sort of “inbetweeners” (118). According to Iwabuchi (2005), they are searching for a third way between the tendency towards assimilation and the “homeland nostalgia”, “looking neither to naturalisation, which would require them to abandon their ethnicity, not to returning to a divided or even unified homeland” (68). This could be identified as the hybrid trait of the younger ethnic Korean residents in Japan. Even if they have to face racial discrimination, hiding their descent thanks to the physical similarities between Korean and Japanese people or even the adoption of Japanese names, the new generations of *zainichi* generally seem inclined to integration into Japanese society (Visočnik, 2013, 120; Ryang 2005, 7).

The topic of the Korean minority in Japan is addressed here through Hiroki Ryūichi’s *Sayonara Kabukichō* (*Kabukicho Love Hotel*, 2014), partially shot on locations in Shinjuku, Tokyo’s Korea Town.

*Sayonara Kabukichō* is a portrait of Tokyo’s entertainment and red-light district, situated in Shinjuku ward. Kabukichō is the location of many host and hostess clubs, as well as love hotels. The Hotel Atlas shown in the movie (the English title is *Kabukicho Love Hotel*) is one of these short-stay hotels which allow guests privacy for sexual activities. The movie events are supposed to take place within a chaotic 24-hour period, following the intersecting stories of the protagonists, who decide to get out of their dead-end lives as a result of that day’s turmoil.

Lee He-Na (Heya in the English version, interpreted by Lee Eun-Woo) is a Korean migrant who is going through her last day of work at the “Juicy Fruits” agency as a *der-*

*theru* (“delivery health”), an escort service where call girls are dispatched to their customers’ homes or to hotels. He-Na’s residence permit expired, and she decided to go back to Korea to open a boutique with her mother, while her boyfriend, An Chonsu (Chong-su in the English version, interpreted by Roy) wants to remain in Japan where he plans to open a restaurant. Chonsu, who works hard as a cook at a Korean eatery, seems to reckon that He-Na is just a hostess, apparently not being aware of her involvement in prostitution. Still, the impending separation looks like it will be an end to their relationship. Later on, we see He-Na being cuddled by her manager Kubota, then meeting at the hotel one of her habitual clients, the shy and passionate salaryman Amemiya, who finally proposes to her. In the end, Chonsu finds out the true nature of He-Na’s job, admitting to her that he also worked as a prostitute to make ends meet. The two reconcile, resolving to leave Japan and make a return to Korea.

As already mentioned, the movie was partially shot in Shin-Ōkubo, Tokyo’s Korea Town, serving as a useful start to our considerations on reporting the ‘impressions from the field’. As director Hiroki said in 2015 during the press talk at Far East Film Festival 17 in Udine, Italy<sup>13</sup>, lots of Korean stars and idols live in Shin-Ōkubo, and “there are a lot of Japanese people who go there just to have a look at the Korean way of life”. This seems to support Yamanaka’s belief that *Hallyu* generated “a desire to know the background of media products” (2010). Asked about the relationship between the two communities, Hiroki said that their contrasts “are not that harsh as they are depicted by the mass media”. As Visočnik (2013) pointed out, the discrimination against ethnic Korean minority is often alimented by media discourse. Hiroki added that:

As far as I am concerned, the relationship between the Korean and ourselves is absolutely perfect. However, inside the film, there is the hate speech scene, in which we hear Japanese people shouting at Koreans to go back home, but there was also a group opposing them and telling them: why do you say so?<sup>14</sup>.

This can be read in the light of Yasumoto’s considerations (2009, 2016): despite recurring nationalisms, the growth in cultural flows can instil mutual respect and under-

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<sup>13</sup> The author of the present paper was present at the press talk.

<sup>14</sup> Hiroki’s interview at Far East Film Festival 2015 is available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gpqqo-eQfkog>

standing. Though the prejudice against the Korean minority from Shin-Ōkubo is testified by the Japanese people shouting “go home!”, another part of Japanese public opinion protested against this manifestation of nationalism and ethnocentrism.

Hiroki marked the differences existing in Japanese society with regard to the Korean minority, blaming the neo-nationalist discourse:

So these are two elements of the society and you may find the right wing supporters that behave like that. Of course there are people who demonstrate against the Koreans in Japan, but we... we Japanese... are ashamed of these behaviours actually.

Hiroki finally mentioned the Korean audience reaction to the movie:

In the film you find an actress [Lee Eun-woo] who strips off her clothes, she is totally naked and there is a very sexy scene, and I know that the Korean community was not happy about that and they complained with me. So most probably many Koreans may have objected to her: ‘Why do you make film with the Japanese? They only ask you to get undressed!’<sup>15</sup>

It cannot be underestimated the involuntary link that a Korean audience could make between the representation in a Japanese movie of a Korean escort in Japan and the ‘comfort women’ issue. The Korean viewers might have perceived the scene as a stereotypical representation of the Korean woman as subordinated to the Japanese man, in continuity with the colonial heritage. About the Korean audience’s general reception of the movie, Hiroki finally stated: “[...] we presented *Sayonara Kabukichō* at the Busan Festival [the most significant film festival in Korea], and who could see the complete film for the first time there highly praised the film... it was very well accepted by the Busan audience”. Cinema as a form of popular culture can contribute to establishing “a new form of citizenship” (Yasumoto, 2016), but this involves a social and political responsibility of directors and screenwriters. In this regard, we have just mentioned the outcry sparked in South Korea by Tsutsui’s derogatory comment about the ‘comfort woman’ statue.

Speaking of the two Korean protagonists of Hiroki’s movie, He-Na and Chonsu, they initially seem to follow different approaches about Japan and their future: He-Na can be ascribed to the approach Visočnik (2013,119) calls *sokokushikō* (“inclination to-

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<sup>15</sup> Also from the link above.

wards the homeland”), while Chonsu tends to *dōkashikō* (“inclination towards assimilation”). In the end, despite the fact they belong to the younger generation of Korean migrants, usually more inclined to consider Japan as their new home (*ibid.*), they choose to return to Korea, showing the same attachment of older generations to the homeland and deciding to invest in a future together in Korea.

☞ Japanese colonialism in the recent Korean cinema: *Amsal*

Colonialism and nationalism have been explored many times by Asian cinema (Dis-sanayake, 1994). The rediscovery of Korea’s colonial past, linked to the ‘comfort women’ issue, can be seen through the lens of Choi Dong-hoon’s *Amsal* (*Assassination*, 2015) and Cho Jung-rae’s *Kwihyang* (*Spirits’ Homecoming*, 2016). *Amsal* is one of the biggest box-office hits in Korean film history, with over 12.7 million admissions<sup>16</sup>. The complex plot of this espionage action film extends from 1911, at the beginning of the Japanese rule over Korea, to 1949, after the defeat of Japan in World War II. A Korean resistance fighter, Yem Seok-jin (acted by Lee Jung-jae), tries to kill both the Japanese Governor-General and Kang In-gook (interpreted by Lee Kyoung-young), a businessman in collusion with the Japanese, but his attempt fails. In 1933, more than thirty Korean independence factions operate in Korea, China, and Manchuria. Yem, apparently serving as a captain for one of these factions, has indeed become a spy for the Japanese, having been tortured by them in 1911. The destiny of Yem intersects with that of three resistance members, Big Gun (acted by Cho Jin-woong), Hwang Deok-Sam (Choi Deok-moon), and An Ok-Yoon (Jun Ji-hyun, also known as Gianna Jun). During the movie, Kang is killed by the Korean resistance, while Yem, who had been made head of the secret police for his collaboration with the Japanese, is investigated for war crimes in 1949. Yem manages to escape the condemnation by protesting his innocence, but he is subsequently killed by An and another former member of the Korean resistance.

Choi’s movie represents some of the most significant traits of the Korean resistance during the Japanese rule: the presence in different countries and territories such as Korea itself, China, and Manchuria; the inner divisions within different factions of the resistance movement; the co-optation of the Korean elite (see the character of Kang In-

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<sup>16</sup> See on this point: List of highest-grossing films in South Korea. *Wikipedia* [Online] Available from: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_highest-grossing\\_films\\_in\\_South\\_Korea](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_highest-grossing_films_in_South_Korea) [Accessed 15 May 2017]



gook); the recruitment of the poorer Koreans for the police forces (considerable numbers of the police force included Koreans) (Kleiner, 2010, 31); the existence of a large network of informants (as in the case of Yem Seok-jin). The film shows some historical Korean politicians whose role in the resistance was prominent, such as Kim Koo, a member of the independence movement *Sinminhoe* (“New People’s Association”), exiled to Shanghai in 1919 where he joined the Provisional Government of the Republic of Korea, and Kim Won-Bong, a Korean anarchist and independence activist. As for the attempt to kill the General-Governor shown in the movie, in actual history, in 1910, there was a plot to assassinate the general-governor Terauchi Masataki, leading to the arrest of An Myung-geun.

The anti-Japanese theme characterised some of the earliest Korean movies, such as *Arirang* (1926), which caused Japanese censorious reaction on cinema in the 1930s. In the 1960s it was time for the so-called ‘Manchurian Westerns’, set along the Chinese-Korean border in the 1930s, when China’s Northeast became a frontier land for outlaws and resistance fighters against the Japanese colonisation. The topic was addressed more ironically in movies like *Hanbando* (2006), which represents a Japanese attempt to occupy the Korean Peninsula again. If *Amsal* takes place during the Japanese colonial period and its programming in theatres coincides with the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of World War II, *Myeongryang* (*The Admiral: Roaring Current*, 2014), which is still the highest-grossing Korean film ever, is inspired by the Battle of Myeongnyang (1597), where the Korean Admiral Yi Sun-sin defeated a Japanese fleet of 330 vessels with the only 12 ships remained in his command. The colonial period was also the setting for a television series broadcasted in 2007, *Gyeongseong Seukaendeul* (*Capital Scandal*), representing the conflict between the independence fighters and the collaborationists. A recent period drama movie by Hur Jin-ho (*Deokhye-ongju*, international title *The Last Princess*, 2016) depicted the thirteen-year-old Princess Deokhye’s attempts to return to Korea after she was forced to move there by the Imperial Japanese government. Even more recently, *Gunhamdo* (*The Battleship Island*, 2017), a movie by Ryoo Seung-wan, is based on the story of an attempted prison break from Hashima Island in Nagasaki prefecture, a forced labour camp for hundreds of Korean workers during World War II.

In conclusion, it can be said that the recent nationalist wave in East Asia influences the cinema audiences in China, Japan, and Korea, stimulating their taste for epic. It seems that “consumers in China, Korea, and Japan are embracing” big patriotic movies

“against the backdrop of real-world geopolitical drama, and the demand for them has grown as diplomatic relations have worsened” (St. Michel 2015, n.p.). Specifically, in recent years we assist to a nationalistic trend in Korean cinema, “where the Japanese serve as the villains” (*ibid.*). One must notice that female characters play a significant role in the plot of both *Gyeongseong Seukaendeul* and *Amsal*, for instance: the yearning for national independence combines with the goals of the modern self in a coherent national narrative, pervaded by “affective nationalism” (Choi, 2017).

☞ Japanese colonialism in the recent Korean cinema: *Kwihyang*

*Kwihyang* is a 2016 period drama film written and directed by Cho Jung-rae. The first screening was March 1, the Anniversary of the Sam-il Independence Movement (the March 1st Movement), one of the earliest public displays of the Korean resistance during the Japanese rule; actually, the movie was scheduled to be released in time for the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Japan’s surrender in World War II, i.e. 15 August 2015, but it had to be delayed because of distribution problems. Director Cho took inspiration for the movie by a painting of Kang Il-chul, a former comfort woman, who drew it as a part of her art therapy<sup>17</sup>; Cho meant the movie as a form of consolation for the traumatic memories of the former ‘comfort women’<sup>18</sup>: “These young girls suffered such lonely deaths on foreign soil. This movie is about honouring them so at least their spirits can come home” (Asian Movie Pulse, 2016, n.p.).

The movie takes place during the Japanese rule of Korea, in 1943, telling the story of 14-year old Jung-min (Kanga Ha-Na) and 16-year old Young-hee. Jung-min grows up in a poor but happy family, while Young-hee lost her parents during the war, assuming the care of her younger brothers. The two girls are taken by the Japanese soldiers, then sent to Manchuria and forced to prostitution. The film depicts the terrible life of the ‘comfort women’ and the effort of the latter to cope with this intolerable situation, characterised by mistreatment, beatings and torture, trying not to lose their sanity. During a counter-attack to the Japanese forces by the Chinese army, the Japanese soldiers decide to kill all the girls, but the Chinese interrupt the execution, which permits Young-hee and Jung-min to escape the massacre. Unfortunately, Jung-min dies, shot by a Japanese soldier, while Young-hee

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<sup>17</sup> Check on this topic: Asian Movie Pulse (2016).

<sup>18</sup> The ‘comfort women’ issue was recently addressed by Herman Yau’s *The Sleep Curse* (Hong Kong, 2017), which takes place in 1942, when Hong Kong was under Japanese occupation.



manages to survive. The old Young-hee makes friends with a shaman, who performs a homecoming ritual for the spirits of the 'comfort women' killed by the Japanese. Finally, Jung-min's spirit manages to return to her parents' house.

A movie like *Kwihyang* shows how crucial it is to deal with the 'comfort women' issue in order to reconcile Japanese and Korean views of the colonial past. The most conservative fringe of Korean society still considers the 'comfort women' issue a taboo. As Director Cho reported about the potential investors' reactions to the film's subject: "They asked me why I wanted to throw salt on an old wound. They see the subject of comfort women as a history of shame" (Qin, 2015, n.p.). There was also the problem of the links between South Korea's main film distributors and Japan, where the topic is controversial and divisive for the public opinion and the political debate. Indeed, also thanks to the resurgent Korean nationalism and to the call for Japan "to reassess previous apologies for its wartime actions" (*ibid.*), the movie's fortunes changed: Cho Jung-rae resorted to crowd-funding, collecting up to 500 million won (\$457,000) thanks to donations by South Koreans and Korean communities set in Japan and in the United States. Furthermore, several main actors as Son Sook, Oh Ji-Hye and Jung In-Gi took parts in the movie *pro bono* to show their support for the cause (Asian Movie Pulse, 2016, n.p.).

"*Spirits' Homecoming* is different from other movies or documentaries released in Korea that deal with 'comfort women' in that it is almost the first time for such a film to be released commercially" (Hong, 2015, n.p.) and it has been compared by a Korean press article to *Schindler's List* (1993), *La vita è bella* (*Life is Beautiful*, 1997), and *The Pianist* (2002). Director Cho Jung-rae "said he wants this film to act as cultural proof regarding the comfort women issue" (*ibid.*). The ideological meaningfulness of the movie is revealed not only by the massive crowd-funding among Koreans in the motherland and overseas, but also by the Japanese public's response at different levels during the movie's production. *Korea Joongang Daily* reports that "when Kang's acting in the role went viral on the Internet, she suffered from threatening comments" (*ibid.*) in Osaka, where the young actress lives. Furthermore, according to *Korea Daily* and *Korea Joongang Daily*, there was pressure from Japan "by lawsuits against the movie" (Ko, 2016, n.p.).

*Kwihyang* was acclaimed in Korea, gaining the 21<sup>st</sup> Chunsa Film Art Awards for the most popular film. Nevertheless, the narrative on which the movie is built is quite controversial, because "director Cho Jung-rae relied on the oral testimony of one comfort woman and cast Korean actors to portray Japanese; he did not cast Japanese actors or

seek corroborating evidence from other survivors” (Yi, 2017, n.p.). We already mentioned Sarah Soh’s (2008) interpretation of the ‘comfort women’ issue: according to Soh, the work(ers) at comfort stations has to be explained through many different factors: abduction by militaries, economical support to the women’s families, escaping oppressive parents. In her work, Soh gave voice to the different situations experienced by the ‘comfort women’, which included both narratives of abuse and of less dramatic conditions. In 2013, Park Yu-Ha published a Korean-language book, *Comfort Women of the Empire*, whose findings are quite similar to Soh’s ones. Indeed, “a Seoul court partially censored Park’s book and fined her 90 million won (\$74,000) for defaming survivors of enslavement. Prosecutors also requested a three-year jail sentence” (*ibid.*). One could not find a most distinctive (definitive?) proof that the ‘comfort women’ topic is still a ‘burning issue’ in the public debate between Korea and Japan.

### **Conclusions**

Until this point I have conducted a case study of selected movies. Particularly, I have considered one Japanese and two Korean movies, whose contents are deeply connected with the mutual perception of the two countries. The topic of the Korean minority in Japan has been considered through Hiroki Ryūichi’s *Sayonara Kabukichō* (2014), the rediscovery of Korea’s colonial past has been analysed through the perspective of Choi Dong-hoon’s *Amsal* (2015) and the ‘comfort women’ issue has been discussed through Cho Jung-rae’s *Kwihyang* (2016). Japanese and Korean contemporary filmography seems to reflect people’s present worries about a significant Other, geographically and historically linked to the Self, as well as to portray the ethnic and national identity rebuilding through a retelling of history. The resurgent nationalisms influence the audiences in Japan, Korea, and East Asia as well as media discourse, so that some of the highest-grossing blockbusters are permeated with patriotic feelings. Crucial topics such as the ‘comfort women’ issue hit the public’s attention, representing an open wound in the relationship between Japan and Korea, in the more general frame of a reinterpretation of the colonial past. Nevertheless, the media representations of the ‘comfort stations’ remains problematic, swinging between silence and denial of the Japanese state’s responsibility (Morris-Suzuki, 2006). The screening of *Kwihyang* in Japan

had to resort to the 'indie' distribution (Korea Herald, 2016, n.p.)<sup>19</sup>. Today's problems related to the Korean migrants in Japan are in tight connection with the two countries' shared past. Popular culture can reflect these tensions influencing and being influenced by public opinion in East Asian countries.

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<sup>19</sup> There exist recent Korean animated short movies about the 'comfort women' issue: *Herstory* (2011) by Kim Jung-gi, which has been followed by a sequel financed by the Korean government, and *Never Ending Story* (2014). On this topic, see Yoo (2015) and Oh (2015). *Herstory* has also become a live-action movie by Min Kyu-Dong in 2018. Both *Herstory* and *Never Ending Story* have been made available through YouTube, therefore also to the Japanese audience.

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