

Facing Challenges in a New Age: A Multicultural and New Generation Identity for Japan, through Kaneshiro Takeshi and Kubozuka Yōsuke

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Japan's self-identity and its relations with other Asian neighbours have long been the foci of scholars who spend their effort in studying the country. For the Japanese themselves, it is obvious that ambivalence exists in whether they perceive their own country as a member of Asia. From the late nineteenth century when the Meiji Restoration was carried out, Japan was seen as a rising power in the East. Although Japan was defeated in the Second World War in 1945, its fast recovery and rapid economic growth in the postwar era were usually regarded as miracles. These successes have led the Japanese to perceive themselves as a much more outstanding country in Asia compared with its neighbours, and to believe that Japan is superior in many aspects to other Asian countries.

Nevertheless, Japan experienced the collapse of the bubble economy in the early 1990s. At the same time, the 1980s and 1990s were also characterized by the rise of other Asian powers, including China and the Asian Newly Industrialized Economies (ANIEs) of Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan and South Korea.¹ At the turn of the millennium and in the age of globalization, other countries in Asia, especially China, have gained more attention than Japan which was still facing its staggering economy. Such situation resulted in a loss of self-confidence among the Japanese, and brought about the reconsideration of Japan's national identity in Asia and even the demand of "Return to Asia".²

The anxiety of the Japanese during this time is largely reflected in movies produced in this period (from 1990s until recent years). In particular, many movies in this period are characterized by several unique features, including nostalgia for their good old days as revealed in movies involving the resurrection of the dead, or linkage between the dead and the living such as *Love Letter* (1995, Iwai Shunji 岩井俊二), *Crying out Love in the Center of the World* (2004, Yukisada Isao 行定勲) and *Be With You* (2004, Doi Nobuhiro 土井裕泰); examination of the relationship between Japanese and other Asian people (mainly Chinese and Korean) through Asian characters in the movies such as *Swallowtail* (1996, Iwai Shunji) and *Go* (2001, Yukisada Isao), and a hope of regaining confidence of Japanese people through creating heroes in movies, such as *Returner* (2002, Yamazaki Takashi 山崎貴) and *Ping Pong* (2002, Sori Fumihiko 曾利文彦). It is within such context that this paper aims at analyzing the Japanese view on Asia through Japanese movies produced in this period. Also, this paper tries to investigate how, among other means, the Japanese tries to regain their confidence through the construction of movie heroes like Kaneshiro Takeshi 金城武 and Kubozuka Yōsuke 窪塚洋介.

1 McCormack 1996, p. 156.

2 Gössmann mentioned keywords like "Japan's Return to Asia", "Asian Identity" and "Nostalgia for Asia" which describe the ideologies in the period since the mid-1990s. See Gössmann 2001.

Historical Background

Before trying to analyze the Japanese view on Asian countries in the movies, it seems appropriate to first understand why the relations between Japan and its Asian neighbours have caught such attention throughout the years, and why there has been an anxiety to regain self-confidence among the Japanese. This can probably be best achieved by investigating the issue from a historical perspective.

From the time of Meiji Restoration to the beginning of the twenty-first century at present, the period can be roughly divided into three phases.³ The first phase, characterized by the modernization of Japan, runs from the arrival of the black ships of Commodore Matthew Perry of the United States in 1853, through the Meiji Restoration, to the end of the Second World War, during which Fukuzawa Yukichi 福沢諭吉 advocated his idea of “Japan leaving Asia”. The second phase runs from the end of the Second World War to the beginning of the 1990s (the end of Cold War), which is characterized by rapid economic growth in Japan, usually referred to as the “economic miracle”.⁴ The last phase, which runs from 1990s up till now, sees the collapse of the bubble economy in Japan, and the rise of China and other Asian countries in the era of globalization.

During the 1850s, Japan was forced to sign up different unequal treaties with the western powers, including the United States, Britain and France, to open ports for foreign trade. However, ever since the Meiji Restoration and the Modernization of Japan in the late nineteenth century till the end of the Second World War, Japan had seen itself as a rising power in the East, and had the same powerful status as the western countries which had once suppressed Japan under restrictions imposed by the various unequal treaties since the 1850s. The rise of Japan could largely be seen in its victory in the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895) and in the Russo-Japanese War (1905). Under such rapid growths in military, economic and national status, Japan began to distinguish itself with its Asian neighbours including China and other countries in Southeast Asia, which were still suppressed under brutal western aggressions. Although geographically Japan is a country in Asia, Japan has already considered itself to be a powerful state among the western powers.⁵ During this period, Fukuzawa Yukichi advocated his “*Datsu-a ron* 脱亜論” (separation-from-Asia thesis) in Japan, claiming that modernization and civilization of Japan can best be achieved by advanced military establishment.⁶ He saw Japan’s Asian neighbours as less civilized than western nations, and proposed that Japan should leave Asia and go on to a road of modernization and become one of the powerful nations among the western powers.

In 1945, Japan was defeated and the Second World War came to an end. Though being a defeated country who had suffered from massive destructions, Japan experienced fast recovery during the Allied Occupation (1945–1952) in the postwar period. After the end of the Occupation,

3 The three phases mentioned here are similar to those outlined by Steffensen, who, in the essay titled “Post-cold War Changes in Japanese International Identity: Implications for Japan’s Influence in Asia”, discussed the identity of Japan from Meiji times until the present, and Japan’s assumption of a more Asian national identity by referring to historical changes in these periods. See Steffensen 2000.

4 Tipton 2002, p. 169.

5 As Söderberg and Reader noted, the geographical definition of ‘Asia’ does not necessarily converge with what the Japanese themselves mean when they use the term. Japan displayed a tendency to separate itself in terms of identity and orientation from the continent. See Söderberg and Reader 2000, p. 11.

6 *Datsu-a ron* is an article written by Fukuzawa Yukichi and was first published on the newspaper *Jiji shinpō* 時事新報 on 16 March 1885.

Japan saw rapid growths in both the economy and industrial development and recorded an average annual growth of GNP of 8.6 percent from 1951 to 1955, and over 9.1 percent from 1955 to 1960.⁷ Quite a number of reasons account for the rapid growth of Japan's economy at that time. Firstly, Japan's military expenditure was low and capital could be invested on developing infrastructures and technologies. Secondly, the United States depended on Japan for supply of materials and resources during the Korean War (1950–1953). It has been said that the “Korean War has been described as ‘a gift from the gods’ to Japanese recovery and growth”.⁸ In the 1960s, Japan won the opportunity to host the Olympic Games in 1964, which was seen to symbolize Japan's “full re-entry into the international community” and “provided an opportunity to display Japan's industrial and technological achievements”.⁹ From the 1970s to the 1980s, Japan continued to experience rapid economic growth, and was a major producer in both heavy and light industries. During the period, Japan was the world's largest producer of radios and televisions, and was dominant in production of high-technology electronic products such as computer chips and videocassette recorders. For example, Sony, the electronic giant in Japan which launched the world's first transistor television, experienced rapid growth in this period, and is the first Japanese company to offer shares on the New York Stock Exchange in the United States.¹⁰

The early 1990s saw the collapse of the bubble economy of Japan.¹¹ Between 1991 and 1998, real GDP in Japan grew at an average of roughly 1 percent annually, compared to the growth in the 1980s of about 4 percent per year.¹² The growth of the economy in Japan in this decade has been slower than the growth in other major industrial nations. Meanwhile, other Asian countries experienced rapid economic and industrial growths. For instance, in spite of the Asian financial crisis in 1997, Korea maintained one of Asia's few expanding economies, with the growth rate of 10 percent in 1999.¹³ Moreover, during the late 1990s and the beginning of the twenty-first century, Korean high-tech industries, adopting Japanese corporations' mode of operation, presented products with relatively low price yet high enough quality, became very competitive in the global market, and eventually replaced Japan and Taiwan's domination in various international semiconductor chip production.¹⁴ In addition, the Economic Reform carried out by the Chinese government resulted in rapid growth in the economy of China and its rise in the region. Both the economy and the industrial sector experienced high growth rates during the time, and foreign capital continued to flow into mainland China facilitated by the establishment of the “Special Economic Zones”.¹⁵

7 Japan Encyclopedia 1996, p. 153.

8 Tipton 2002, p. 179.

9 Ibid.

10 After officially establishing its American division in 1960, Sony offered two million shares in the United States market in the form of American Depository Receipts (ADR) in 1961. See Luh 2003, p. 47.

11 The bubble economy of Japan refers to the substantial increase in asset values (stocks and land property) from 1986 to 1990. See Lim 2001, pp. 30–31.

12 Yoshikawa 2001, p. 9.

13 Lee 2001, pp. 619–652.

14 For example, in 1994 the three Korean corporations, Samsung, LG and Hyundai, were in the global top ten list of memory suppliers. See Pecht et al. 1997, p. 11.

15 The Chinese government decided to reform the national economic structure in 1978 and embarked on a policy of opening designated regions in a planned way. The central government gives Special Economic Zones (SEZs) special policies and flexible measures, allowing them to utilize a special economic management system to facilitate trading with other countries. Examples of SEZs include Shenzhen, Zhuhai and Xiamen.

East Asia was developing at such a fast pace that the center of global development has shifted to the region, with its focus on the emerging China. With such a contrast between Japan and other Asian countries, attentions that were once focused on the miracles happened in Japan have shifted to the fast-growing China and other Asian countries. Relatively Japan seems to receive much less attention in this period.

It is under such situation that the Japanese started to lose self-confidence as their regional and global influences declined, and they began to express their nostalgia for their good old days before the burst of the bubble economy through various means, including movies. Approaching the end of the millennium, Asia is no longer characterized by backwardness, as Iwabuchi put it, “the Asia which Japan encounters in the 1990s, however, is no longer contained by the image of traditional, underdeveloped, backward neighbours to be civilized by Japan”.¹⁶ In the age of “Asian Boom” and globalization, it is inevitable that Japan must re-consider its identity and role in Asia, and its relations with other Asian countries which seem to cause potential threats to Japan.

Rebuilding Japanese Self-Confidence

The situation facing the Japanese after the collapse of the bubble economy in the 1990s has triggered several mentalities within the society. These include reminiscing about the good old days before the collapse of the bubble economy through various means, reconsidering Japan’s Asian identity and its role in the region, trying to understand (or re-understand) its Asian neighbours which have been developing fast and have been thought to pose potential threats to Japan’s status both in the region and in the world, and attempting to re-establish Japanese self-confidence as well as the confidence in their own government and nation.

As mentioned in the introductory section, movies such as *Love Letter* and *Be With You*, which tell stories about the resurrection of the dead or linkage between the dead and the living, reveal the Japanese’s nostalgia for their good old days—the days in which Japan was distinguished from the rest of Asia by its outstanding economic and technological advancement—as symbolized in these movies by the hope that they could experience again the lives with their family members and good friends who have already passed away. Other than movies, glories of Japan in the past were occasionally mentioned in this period through various means. For example, in 1998, *Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai* (NHK) 日本放送協会 produced a documentary on the war-time famous actress and singer, Li Xianglan 李香蘭 (Yamaguchi Yoshiko 山口淑子), of the Manchuria Film Corporation.¹⁷ Li was celebrated for both her movies and songs during the war-time period, and many of her songs have become beloved classics.¹⁸ The celebrated actor and singer Ishihara Yūjiro 石原裕次郎 was also remembered by many Japanese during this period. Ishihara was most welcome during

16 Iwabuchi 2000, p. 14.

17 In 1998, NHK launched a documentary on the life of Li Xianglan, with the title “*Sekai wagakokoro no tabi Ri Kōran harukanaru tabiji Chūgoku Roshia*” 世界・わが心の旅・李香蘭 遙かなる旅路～中国・ロシア～ (A Journey of the Heart: Ri Kōran, A Long Journey: China and Russia).

18 Li Xianglan (1920–), now known as Ōtaka Yoshiko 大鷹淑子 in Japan, was born Yamaguchi Yoshiko to Japanese parents who both lived in Manchuria, China. Yamaguchi made her debut as an actress in the movie *Honeymoon Express* (1938, Ueno Shinji 上野真嗣) with a Chinese pseudonym Li Xianglan. Her singing of the movie theme songs also made her one of the top singers in Japan and even among the Chinese-speaking region in Asia. After the end of the war in 1945, Yamaguchi returned to Japan and started a new acting career. She left the show business in 1974 and turned to serve a political role in Japan.

the late 1950s and the early 1960s. His songs were also widely accepted by young people at that time. In July 1991, the Ishihara Yujiro Memorial Hall was opened in his home town in Hokkaido. In 1999, the thirteenth year after Ishihara's death, an unprecedented 170,000 fans of him went to Sojiji Temple in remembrance of this great star. Besides celebrities, Japanese people also feel proud of their cultural contributions to and influences on other places. In 1995 NHK produced a documentary with the title "Heroes of the Hong Kong Cinema", in which Japanese contributions to the advancement and development of Hong Kong cinema was emphasized. More recently in 2003, SMAP, the most popular Japanese group comprising five pop stars, sponsored a full-page advertisement in the newspaper *Yomiuri shinbun* 読売新聞 with the title "MIJ" (Made in Japan). The advertisement encouraged the Japanese people to feel proud of themselves by mentioning achievements of Japanese celebrities in different areas.¹⁹

Besides, different changes in the role of Asians in Japanese movies in this period also revealed the shifting view of Japan on Asia and Asian people. Starting from the beginning of the 1990s, there were an increasing number of movies in which there were Asian people, and in which stories about the relations between Japanese and other Asian people were told. Another change was that either Asians in the movies in this period began to take up more positive roles, or the movies showed a relatively more positive attitude towards the Asians, an attitude which is more inclined to mutual understanding. The reason, as Schilling (1999) has put in an article titled "*Asians in Japan, Japanese in Asia*", was probably that "during the bubble economy years of the late 1980s and early 1990s, Asian students and workers began to flood into Japan in unprecedented numbers and enter the popular consciousness through a variety of media, including film".²⁰ Movies produced in this period, such as *Beijing Watermelon* (1989, Obayashi Nobuhiko 大林宣彦), *Swallowtail* (1996, Iwai Shunji), *Sleepless Town* (1998, Lee Chi-ngai 李志毅), *The Hazard City* (2000, Miike Takashi 三池崇史), *Go* (2001, Yukisada Isao) and *Seoul* (2002, Nagasawa Masahiko 長澤雅彦), tried with different approaches to explore the lives of people from other Asian countries in Japan or how other Asian people interacted with Japanese people. Following the economic crisis in the early 1990s, "the prevailing pessimistic atmosphere about the future caused people in Japan to turn their attention to the ascendancy of other Asian nations who were enjoying remarkable economic growth".²¹ As in *Swallowtail*, the Asian characters are displaying vital virtues and the enthusiasm about fulfilling their dreams, which were once found in the Japanese during their good old days. This movie can be considered as Japan's projection of their nostalgia for the good old days onto other Asian people.

In this period, we identify Kaneshiro Takeshi and Kubozuka Yōsuke, who both have been active in Japanese cinema and have played major roles in movies which carry reassuring messages, or attempt to rebuild self-confidence of the Japanese with different approaches. In the remainder of this paper, we investigate the roles of Kaneshiro Takeshi and Kubozuka Yōsuke in Japanese movies, and see how they are portrayed as movie heroes or role models on whom the Japanese's desire and hope to regain their self-confidence are projected.

19 A full-page advertisement sponsored by SMAP was published in the *Yomiuri shinbun* on 16 June 2003 with the title "MIJ".

20 Schilling 1999, p. 123.

21 Iwabuchi 2000, p. 177.

Kaneshiro Takeshi and Japan's Identity Crisis

Kaneshiro Takeshi, recently cast in the Hong Kong movie *Perhaps Love* (2005, Peter Chan), was born in Taiwan of a Japanese father and a Taiwanese mother. With such a unique background, Kaneshiro is fluent in several languages including Mandarin, Japanese, Cantonese, Taiwanese and English. Kaneshiro started his rise to stardom by making commercials during his school years in Taiwan, followed by his singing career. Later on, Kaneshiro was offered roles in movies such as *Chungking Express* (1994) and *Fallen Angels* (1995), both directed by the famous Hong Kong director Wong Kar-wai 王家衛.²²

Kaneshiro participated in both Hong Kong and Japanese movies, and has been favoured by audiences in the two places. However, his roles and images are very different in the movies of the two places. To most Hong Kong people, Kaneshiro is attractive largely because of his handsome and masculine appearance, and his unusual background as a half-Taiwanese-half-Japanese. In Hong Kong movies, Kaneshiro was usually cast as a romantic lover. In *Perhaps Love*, he was cast as a Hong Kong star who was invited by a famous Chinese director to play a leading role in a film which also casting his former girlfriend. In *Tempting Heart* (1999, Sylvia Chang), Kaneshiro played a Hong Kong young man who faced pressure and difficulties in a romantic relationship with his high-school lover. In *Turn Left Turn Right* (2003, Johnnie To, Wai Ka-fai 韋家輝), casting again Kaneshiro and Gigi Leung, a love story between a violinist (Kaneshiro) and a translator (Gigi Leung), who both lived alone and strived to earn a living in Taipei, was told. In an interview, Johnnie To, the director of *Turn Left Turn Right*, mentioned that his choosing of Kaneshiro as a hero in the movie was due to the fact that Kaneshiro's mixed (both local and exotic) image. Kaneshiro may be considered as a Japanese, but at the same time he can also be considered as a Taiwanese. To the audience, Kaneshiro would be exactly a Prince Charming with the sort of exotic charisma that is expected to appear in a movie adopted from an illustrated novel.²³ In other words, Kaneshiro's multi-national background is singled out by Hong Kong directors as an element which adds air of romance to the love stories. While being cast as a local person, his strange Cantonese accent also gives audience a distant but romantic impression.

On the other hand, Kaneshiro's roles in Japanese movies are quite different from his roles in Hong Kong movies. Kaneshiro was first noticed by the Japanese after appearing in *Chungking Express*, playing the character of a cop who refused to face the reality that her girlfriend had left him. His using of different languages, including English, Cantonese, Mandarin and Japanese, to make phone calls in a scene gave Japanese audiences a profound and multi-cultural impression. Kaneshiro first received public attention in Japan not because of his appearance in Japanese movies but instead in a TV drama *God, Please Give Me More Time* in 1998, in which he played a cool music producer who grew up in the United States and produced popular music in Japan. Following the success of this TV drama, he played different roles in Japanese movies, such as *Sleepless*

22 Kaneshiro Takeshi (1973–) was born and raised in Taipei, Taiwan. He began to work on TV commercials during his school years when he was studying in the Taipei American School, and later on quitted school to pursue a singing and acting career in Taiwan. He started his singing career in 1992 by his debut album *Heart-breaking Night*, and eventually began his acting career driven by his popularity of his singing performance. His first participation in the movie business was in *Executioners* (1993, Ching Siu-tong 程小東, Johnnie To). Kaneshiro appeared in the Japanese show business in the late 1990s, and worked on both TV drama series and Japanese movies.

23 *City Entertainment* 2003, pp. 32–34.

Town (1998, Lee Chi-ngai), *Space Traveler* (2000, Motohiro Katsuyuki 本広克行) and *Returner* (2002, Yamazaki Takashi). In these movies, the roles played by Kaneshiro are all characterized by unusual backgrounds and origins. In *Sleepless Town*, Kaneshiro played the role of a half-Japanese-half-Chinese who managed hard to survive amidst gangsters of different origins inhabiting the Kabukicho streets. *Space Traveler* casts Kaneshiro as the leader of a bank robbery, of which all the three members were orphans who had longed for a comfortable and leisure life. In *Returner*, Kaneshiro played the role of a killer, Miyamoto, who had been searching for a bad guy that caused the death of his childhood friends, and was ultimately involved in assisting a “returner” from the future, Miri, to save the world. All these Japanese movies depict Kaneshiro as characterized by borderless-ness, transnationalism, possession of a heroic charisma, wildness and mysterious personal backgrounds.

To the Japanese, Kaneshiro’s unique multi-national background somehow resembles their identity crisis or their loss of self-esteem after the burst of the bubble economy. In an interview, Kaneshiro was once asked about his own feelings towards his half-Taiwanese-half-Japanese background. He answered that to him mainland China is no more than a place for work, while Japan is both similar and distant to him; and although he was born in Taiwan, he sometimes perceives himself as a Japanese who speaks Chinese. He admitted that sometimes he is confused, feeling that he is having intangible relationship with these places.²⁴ These kinds of feeling are exactly those experienced by the Japanese in the period after the burst of the bubble economy in the early 1990s. As mentioned before, Japan, after adopting the western way of modernization during the Meiji Restoration and the western system of capitalism and democracy during the period of Allied Occupation, had been transformed into a super power in Asia. However, the burst of the bubble economy made Japan fall back behind its rising neighbours in Asia, which it once perceived as passive and undeveloped. Japan has been pulled between sharing an Asian identity with its neighbours and keeping the sense of Japanese uniqueness which symbolize its superiority and quality comparable to those western giants. Besides, the hatred of Asian people, mainly Chinese and Korean, towards Japan due to Japanese occupations during the war period has complicated the matter.²⁵

From this perspective, Kaneshiro’s feeling towards his own identity (nationality) resembles Japan’s confusion in its identity. The complications of having a mixed background have been clearly reflected in one of Kaneshiro’s movies, *Sleepless Town*. In the movie, the protagonist Ryu Kenichi, played by Kaneshiro Takeshi, was a half-Chinese-half-Japanese. At the beginning of the movie, Ryu was stopped by a policeman and was asked for his identification, his identity as a Japanese was being doubted. Similarly, because of his half-Japanese background, he was also not fully trusted by the Chinese gangsters than inhabited the Kabukicho area in Shinjuku. Struggling between these two identities, Ryu himself chose to regard himself as neither Chinese nor Japanese, as mentioned in his monologue at the beginning of the movie.

On the other hand, the image of Kaneshiro in these Japanese movies also reflects how Japan perceives its Asian neighbours. In the eyes of the Japanese, Asia was once characterized by backwardness and impotent to resist the suppression of the western powers. However, in the recent

24 *City Entertainment* 1995, pp. 28–32.

25 Throughout the past twenty years, Japan has been criticized by other Asian countries, mainly China, North and South Korea, for allowing textbooks to soften the descriptions of atrocities that the Japanese army has done during the Second World War. China and South Korea have also criticized the Japanese prime ministers for visiting the Yasukuni Shrine, in which war dead and wartime criminals are commemorated.

decades, Japan's neighbouring countries have shown rapid development in many different aspects and have caught the attention of the whole world. The Japanese discovered that their perception of these countries is no longer a correct one, and these Asian countries and Asian people appear to be so mysterious and energetic that it has triggered the Japanese's renewed desire to understand and to know more about Asia in this new era. Kaneshiro gives a pleasing impressive to Japanese audience because he is half-Japanese and is able to communicate fluently in Japanese, but at the same time they also discover something that is of Asia or simply exotic in Kaneshiro. They find that Kaneshiro is as familiar to them as he is distant to them.

In view of the current situation of Japan, the trend of globalization and rise of other Asian countries, it seems appropriate to interpret Kaneshiro's roles in Japanese movies as a projection of the Japanese people's desire to regain their influence, to reassure their own position and self-identity in Asia and even the whole world. With the rise of other Southeast Asian countries in the period, competitions drove Japan to strive hard to maintain its edge in Asia. Towards end of the millennium, the wave of globalization resulted in a much closer relationship and more exchange between neighbouring countries. As other Asia countries are gaining more and more attention in the international stage, Japan became eager to reassert its identity as an Asian country to regain its influence in the region. In addition, facing western hegemony, Japan's economic, cultural and political ties with China, South Korea and other Asian countries are inevitably strengthened. It is in such context that the Japanese encountered Kaneshiro Takeshi, who has a half-Japanese-half-Taiwanese background and who speaks several Asian languages due to his unique background. To the Japanese, having a Japanese background and be able to communicate fluently in other Asian countries, Kaneshiro seems to be a suitable representative for them in the stage of Asia. His borderless-ness and transnational image, in addition to his fluency in English, resembles something belongs to the age of globalization and pan-Asianism. Kaneshiro becomes someone on whom the dream of recovery can be projected and someone who could help the Japanese to regain their self-confidence.

In *Returner*, Kaneshiro provided his assistance to Miri who returned from the future and together they strived to save the world in limited time. In the movie, that Tibet, a place deep in China, was depicted as the last place of refuge for mankind, seems to symbolize the Japanese's anxiety about their future being fallen into China's hand. Even though Kaneshiro played only an assistant role and was not like Miri who had a strong will and objective to save the world, Kaneshiro had played an important role in altering the destiny of mankind, because it is Kaneshiro who had finally saved the world. In the beginning of the movie, Miri appeared among the group of people who strived hard to survive the attack of the aliens. The people, notably Americans, speaking English—a language generally accepted as an international language—represent the final destiny of mankind, and Miri, as the representative of this group of people, went back to the past to ask for help. Therefore, Kaneshiro's role in the movie and his success in saving the world symbolize Japan's influence and its ability to play an important role in the world. In this sense, *Returner* can be seen as a film which tries to reassure the Japanese of their country's potentiality and ability in influencing and leading the world, even with the rise of China and other neighbouring Asian countries. The presence of Kaneshiro, who possesses both a Japanese background and a borderless transnational image, also reassure the Japanese that they possess the vitality to reveal their strengths to the whole world in the age of globalization.

Kubozuka Yōsuke's Hero Image in Japanese Movies

While Kaneshiro can be considered as a transnational and borderless hero who was discovered by Japan and on whom the Japanese have projected their dream to regain their self-confidence and their influence in both Asia and the world, Kubozuka Yōsuke can be considered as another movie hero in Japan who represents the new generation that no longer cling to traditional and conservative ideas of nationality and ethnicity, and who embrace the trend of globalization and stretch oneself towards the world outside the region bounded by Japan or Asia.

Kubozuka appeared in the show business as models for magazines, before he first played a role in the TV drama series *Kindaichi Case Files* (1995). Thereafter he has appeared in quite a number of TV drama series, and was favoured by audience and particularly praised for his performances in *GTO (Great Teacher Onizuka)* (1998) and *Ikebukuro West Gate Park* (2000). Kubozuka started to cast in movies in 1996.²⁶ *Go* is probably the best known movie with Kubozuka, who acted as a *zainichi* Korean 在日コリアン (Korean resident in Japan) in the movie, which brought him the Japan Academy Award (Best Actor), the youngest in the Award's history.²⁷

Go, adapted from a novel by Kaneshiro Kazuki 金城一紀,²⁸ is a movie about Asian minorities in Japan. In particular, the movie tries to look into the issue of *zainichi* Koreans, the largest minority group in Japan.²⁹ It tells the story of Sugihara, a Japan-born North Korean, who chose to leave the North Korean school and enter a normal Japanese high school. However, because of his Korean background, he was not welcomed by his Japanese classmates, and conflicts usually ended up in serious fights. His Korean background was also the main impediment in his romantic relationship with a Japanese girl, Sakurai.

Go in many different ways reveals how *zainichi* Koreans are discriminated in the Japanese society. Sugihara made the decision to move to a Japanese high school, only to find out that the relationship with his classmates ended up in violence. His girlfriend, Sakurai, was unable to accept the fact that he was not Japanese. When Sugihara encountered a policeman, the movie also reminds the audience that foreigners in Japan must always carry their identity card on which their fingerprint is embedded.³⁰ All these incidents reflect how clear a boundary Japanese people have

26 Kubozuka Yōsuke (1979–) is a famous Japanese actor born in Yokosuka, Japan. His performances in TV drama series earned him popularity among Japanese audiences. He has also participated in several movies including *Go* (2001, Yukisada Isao), *Laundry* (2002, Mori Jun'ichi 森淳一) and *Ping Pong* (2002, Sori Fumihiko). In 2004, Kubozuka was reported to fall from the balcony of his ninth-floor apartment in Yokosuka, and suffered serious injuries. His agency said that it was an accident, but the media looked at the incident as a suicide attempt.

27 Kubozuka Yōsuke was selected as the Best Actor in the twenty-fifth Japan Academy Award in 2001, for his performance in *Go*, directed by Yukisada Isao.

28 Kaneshiro Kazuki (1968–) is a *zainichi* Korean novelist whose novel *Go* made him the youngest recipient of the prestigious Naoki Sanjugo Award for fiction in 2000.

29 According to the statistics at Immigration Bureau of Japan, there were 607,419 *zainichi* Koreans, accounting for 30.8 percent of the total number of foreign residents in Japan, as of year 2004. See *Heisei jūroku-nen-matsu genzai ni okeru gaikokujin tōrokusha tōkei ni tsuite* at <http://www.moj.go.jp/PRESS/050617-1/050617-1.html>.

30 In Japan, foreigners with legal reason for staying in the country must register, and from 1952 through 1992, they were fingerprinted upon registration. In 1992, permanent residents of Korean and Chinese origin

established between Japanese and non-Japanese. Furthermore, such distinction between Japanese and non-Japanese is by no means on equal basis. As Sakurai had told Sugihara, her father thought that the blood of Chinese and Korean people is dirty and she should not get involved with them. This even reveals the fact that Japanese people perceive themselves as not only different from but as superior to other Asian people.

It is also interesting to note the ambivalence expressed in the words of Sakurai's father. During his dinner with Sugihara, he expressed his opinions of the Japanese government, and said that sometimes he would feel ashamed to be a Japanese. When Sugihara asked what the name of the country, *Nihon*, means, he hesitated. The scene somehow reflects how Japanese are confused with their own origin but at the same time try hard to distinguish themselves from the rest of their neighbours. When one asks "What *Japan* means", a question that follows would be "*What 'Japanese' means*". When there are confusions and uncertainties even in these questions, then what is the point of insisting on a clear boundary between Japanese and non-Japanese?

On the other hand, *Go* tries to express the idea that the discriminations against foreigners are only undesirable prejudice left behind by the previous generations, and the new generation will be more willing to show a more open attitude towards issues regarding nationality and ethnicity. Sugihara's Korean classmate encouraged Sugihara to break through the boundaries between Korean and Japanese and to try to experience the outside world that is not reachable in the Korean school. The policeman whom Sugihara encountered showed his ignorance of the rule that foreigners must carry their identity card, suggesting that the enforcement of such rule is not important to the stability of the society at all. He also shared with Sugihara his experience of dating a Korean girl, showing that there is nothing unacceptable in a relationship between Japanese and Korean, and that talking about these things is not shameful at all. In the end, Sakurai came to accept Sugihara regardless of his Korean background, echoing the famous line from William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, "What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet", which was quoted by Sugihara's best friend Shōichi.³¹ In fact, like Sugihara in the movie, many *zainichi* Koreans in Japan adopt Japanese names to avoid prejudices and discriminations in their social lives. With this story, *Go* manifests the idea that people should not be judged merely by the name they are called, and thus discrimination based on nationality or ethnicity is total ignorance.

Besides, the movie reveals how some *zainichi* Koreans persisted in clinging to their own nationality and to talk about Japanese with disdain, to an extent that makes them equally as unapproachable as the Japanese have made themselves. For example, the teacher in the North Korean school violently forbade the students to speak Japanese, and considered studying in Japanese school as an act of betrayal to their own country. This suggests that the discrimination experienced by *zainichi* Koreans may not be the sole responsibility of the Japanese, and rather Koreans should also not to restrict their thinking by national or ethnical boundaries.

were exempted from the fingerprinting requirement, but other foreigner residents continued to be fingerprinted until 2000. By law, foreigners must carry their passport or alien registration card at all times.

31 This line appears in the play *Romeo and Juliet* by the famous English playwright William Shakespeare (1564–1616). In the play, Romeo Montague and Juliet Capulet meet and fall in love with each other. However they are doomed from the very beginning because they are members of two families which are long at feud with each other. With the words in this quotation, Juliet tells Romeo that what name he bears is not important at all, because she loves the person who is called "Montague", but not the name "Montague" nor the Montague family.

Go delineates the problems faced by *zainichi* Koreans as a struggle of individuals such as Sugihara and his Korean friends, rather than focusing on the conflicts between a group of *zainichi* Koreans and the Japanese. Throughout the story, Sugihara faced discriminations on his own: fighting with schoolmates in the basketball court, being rejected by Sakurai due to his Korean background, and facing the death of his best friend Shoichi. However, Sugihara refused to accept the stereotype of *zainichi* Koreans established by both the Japanese (his Japanese schoolmates, Sugihara and her father, etc.) and the Koreans (his teacher in the North Korean School), and actively tried to break out of these restrictions. Cast by Kubozuka, Sugihara is portrayed as a hero who boldly challenges fixed beliefs and prejudices of nationality and ethnicity. His strong will to become free from being stereotyped as *zainichi Korean* and challenge discriminations is also revealed through his experiences in the movie, including his stepping out of the North Korean school and entering Japanese school, and his engagement with Sakurai. From such perspective, we may also see that the movie suggests that the reason of discriminations and conflicts faced by the Korean minorities in Japan is more because of the deep-rooted and close-minded attitude of the people than the conflicting background and cultural differences between the two groups. It is the ignorant belief in categorizing people by their nationality or ethnicity that hinders mutual respect and understanding between the two groups of people. The movie expresses the belief that only if one is willing to challenge these misunderstanding and prejudice, can he become free and be respected. In this sense, Kubozuka is not only a hero that possesses a free and open attitude towards nationality and is willing to challenge traditional beliefs, but also a hero that will make mutual respect and understand between different nations possible.

In another movie, *Ping Pong*, we can see a different type of heroic image in the character played by Kubozuka. Kubozuka played the role of Hoshino, a talented but carefree table-tennis player who wanted to be the world's best table-tennis player. His friend Tsukimoto, who was also a talented player in the sport, had learnt to play table-tennis from Hoshino since childhood, and saw Hoshino as a hero. The movie tells the story of Hoshino in which he, though being an ambitious and confident player, experienced failure and frustration in his life of table-tennis, and finally gathered himself up with the support from his friends.

One of the very strong opponents of Hoshino in the movie is China, a Chinese high school student who left China and hoped to become the best table tennis player in Japan. In their first encounter, China was unfamiliar and mysterious to Hoshino. Hoshino, who thought that he was always the best player, was completely defeated by China, who could read the styles of different players by merely listening to the sounds of a table-tennis match. However, Hoshino, with the support and trust of his friends, was finally able to stand up again and defeat China. As the only foreigner among the main characters in the movie, China represents to certain extent how Japanese perceives people in other Asian countries. At the beginning when China first appeared in front of Hoshino and Tsukimoto, he spoke a different language, and had tattoo on his legs. His skills in playing table tennis were also totally unknown to Hoshino. He somehow resembles Japan's image of other Asian countries in the 1980s and 1990s, when all of a sudden China, Korea, Hong Kong, and other places in Asia started to rise and develop at a fast pace. The "China" in the movie and the "China" in the real world both appeared to the Japanese as something unfamiliar and unknown, and it is exactly such impression of unfamiliarity which has constituted the feeling of fear in the Japanese, as well as the perception that the Japanese's status is under threat.

However, though as someone who had once completely defeated the protagonist of the movie, China was not the final opponent of Hoshino in the story. Rather, in a new season of competitions,

Hoshino outplayed China in an early stage, overcame the wound in his knee, and defeated other strong players to become the final winner. In other words, in the end China was neither the winner nor a major obstacle to Hoshino's success and victory. The movie tries to express that the threats and difficulties that come with the unfamiliar and mysterious China are not frightening at all. Rather, the most important thing is that Hoshino regained his self-confidence and once again became the winner and the best player. If we put Japan's current situation in place of Hoshino's, *Ping Pong* carries the message that the rising Asian neighbours of Japan are not as threatening as they appear to be, and Japan can still maintain its edge over the other countries if the Japanese once again show their vitality that they once had in their good old days. Kubozuka is portrayed in this movie as a hero, who is trusted by his friends, and, despite being defeated completely, is able to recover from the wound and to put down any mental burden to become the winner in the end.

Kubozuka is favoured by Japanese audience not only because his roles and images in movies are generally positive and encouraged to challenge established rules and norms, but also because of Kubozuka appears to be a representative for the Japanese by revealing an image of open-mindedness and willingness to face challenges. With Kubozuka and his casting in Japanese movies, Japanese people form a belief that the Japanese society is now more open and less bounded by traditional thinking. Although discriminations of foreigners or foreign residents in Japan are still present (for example, foreigners are often blamed for the increasing crime rate in Japan, though foreigner-related crime figures are not compared with crimes committed by Japanese),³² Kubozuka's image in *Go* has brought comfort and safety to the Japanese audience who have come to believe that the Japanese society is already moving towards a more enlightened direction in which people no longer prejudice foreigners or foreign residents. In other words, on Kubozuka the Japanese has projected their desire to become free from prejudice and traditional thinking, despite the fact that much more work has to be done to achieve this in real situation.

Conclusion

The potential threats to Japan brought about by the rises of other Asian countries, along with the frustration brought about by the collapse of the bubble economy, have brought great challenges to the Japanese in the period since the beginning of the 1990s. Japanese people lost confidence in their own country and own nation, and were afraid to lose their superiority over their neighbours which they have once looked down upon. Apart from recalling the memories of their good old days, Japan is also urged to understand its neighbouring countries, to consider its relationship with them, and to build up the people's confidence in their own country and own nation again.

As we have discussed, such desires are also vividly revealed in the Japanese movies produced in this period. In this paper, we have focused on and discussed the messages carried in the movies casting Kaneshiro Takeshi and Kubozuka Yōsuke, two movie heroes in Japan within this period. Kaneshiro's unique background and his confusion in his own identity both in real life and in movies resemble the identity crisis facing the Japanese after the burst of the bubble economy. With the desire to regain its influences and self-esteem in the region, or to once again excel as a super power in the East, Japan has amplified Kaneshiro's borderless and transnational image, and

32 For example, Tokyo Governor Ishihara Shintarō 石原慎太郎 made a comment on 9 April 2000 on crimes committed by foreigners. He said that "time and time again *sangokujin* 三国人 (foreigners, but sometimes used to refer to second-class citizens), who illegally entered this country, [have] committed atrocious crimes. In the event of an earthquake, riots can be expected, and the army might be called on to maintain order".

has portrayed Kaneshiro as a hero who can represent the Japanese in the age of globalization. On the other hand, Kubozuka's heroic image in Japanese movies symbolizes the increasingly essential virtue of free and open-minded thinking in the new era. Despite of the fact that old thinking still prevails in current Japanese society, Kubozuka has already sent a sense of relief and comfort to the Japanese people by acting in movies as a hero who is open to new ways of thinking and is willing to take up challenges.

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Acknowledgements: The author gratefully acknowledges the support of the Sumitomo Foundation, who provided a Fiscal 2006 Grant for a Japan-related Research Project.