



## Ethics of Father and Son in Ri's ??? (Watershed Above) and Kaneshiro's GO

Inseop Shin  
*Konkuk University*

Jooyoung Kim  
*Konkuk University*

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**"Ethics of Father and Son in Ri's 流域へ (Watershed Above) and Kaneshiro's GO"**  
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**Abstract:** In their article "Ethics of Father and Son in Ri's 流域へ (Watershed Above) and Kaneshiro's GO" Inseop Shin and Jooyoung Kim discuss the ethics of father and son as they appear in the two novels by Kaisei Ri and Kazuki Kaneshiro. In both narratives the protagonists suffer from ethical conflicts with their fathers during their struggle to find their identities. The father is port-rayed as a figure who determines the ethical choices the protagonists face when they pursue their own lives. Shin and Kim argue that Korean Japanese fiction is a narrative that folds these choices back on oneself. This ultimately connects with the universal theme of literature, namely that each book urges its readers to reexamine their own ethics when they encounter others and their ethics.

## Inseop SHIN and Jooyoung KIM

### Ethics of Father and Son in Ri's 流域へ (Watershed Above) and Kaneshiro's GO

In novels of Korean writers living as permanent residents in Japan, the father frequently has an exceptional influence on the lives of the protagonists. The father is a figure who determines choices which the son faces when building his own life. This constellation of patriarchal power reflects not only historical conditions but also the father's decision to migrate and then live in a society that does not accord full citizenship status to its ethnic minority groups. Kaisei Ri's 流域へ (Watershed Above) was published in 1992 in Japanese and later translated to Korean and Kazuki Kaneshiro's *GO* was published in 2000. There is no English versions published of either novel yet. A common denominator in these two narratives is that they both revolve around a central figure who goes through ethical conflicts in his struggle to establish his identity in an environment he inherited from his father. The two stories are also similar in that the son mirrors ethical choices made by the father, ultimately determining his own direction in life.

At the center of the novels are people who have settled in Japan and whose country and culture of origin are either the Republic of Korea (South Korea) or the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea). It is estimated that around 600,000 people of South or North Korean nationality reside in Japan (see Ryan and Lie 3-6). In Japan they are forced to live as an ethnic minority far from being treated on equal terms with native Japanese. Most of the Korean Japanese were born in Japan and speak Japanese as their native tongue and most of them cannot speak Korean. This makes it difficult for them to move to Korea, besides the fact that they would have to adapt to a culture they are not familiar with. Still, Korean Japanese often identify themselves as Korean. The Korean diaspora in Japan has its roots in the imperial expansion of Japan in the twentieth century. After the World War II., some of the Koreans who settled in Japan remained there. During the Cold War, the Korean Japanese were divided into two ideological groups: the pro-South Korean and the pro-North Korean factions. This has since been a source of continuous conflict within the Korean diaspora in Japan (Yanq 28-29). This historical background often raises thorny and sometimes embarrassing ethical dilemmas for both the ethnic Koreans in Japan and the native Japanese. Although first-generation Korean immigrants who stayed in Japan and raised their children there, many of them did not become naturalized Japanese citizens and continued to speak both languages. Their decision to stay was not welcomed by the Japanese. Nonetheless, the country was too occupied with the responsibilities of the imperial war it waged throughout the Asia-Pacific region and did not banish these immigrants. Presently, Japan has a system of accepting its Korean population separately as permanent residents and reacts to applications for naturalization relatively well. Nevertheless, Japanese Koreans experience various forms of sanctions and suppression on both formal and informal levels.

Kaisei Ri was born in 1935 on the island of Sakhalin that was at the time under Japanese rule. As the Soviet Union moved into the territory in 1945 after the war, Ri escaped with his family from Sakhalin to live in Sapporo, the capital of Hokkaido Prefecture, the northernmost island of Japan. He received several prestigious literary prizes. As an ambitious work of a writer who is one of the most influential writers in both countries, *Watershed Above* is a groundbreaking work in the annals of Korean and Japanese literature. The general tendency of Korean Japanese literature has been to focus on the predicament of the Koreans voluntarily or involuntarily displaced from their native country and thus the narrative motives of Korean Japanese authors often stem from their lifelong struggles with ideas and ideologies inherited from or imposed on them by the native country and the newly settled country (see, e.g., Shin and Kim 328; see also Kim, Won-Chung <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2786>>).

In *Watershed Above*, Ri expands the narrative possibilities of Korean Japanese literature. The narrative is set in 1989 when the Berlin Wall came down. The protagonist Choonsoo describes the significance of the Wall's fall for the existence of the Korean Japanese from an international and historical perspective. With this post-Cold War viewpoint, the protagonist directs his scrutiny inward and on the situation of the Korean Japanese, a situation that has been in disarray ever since the reign of imperial Japan. The novel starts with the trip of Choonsoo and his company around Russia and Central Asia. The trip takes place at the end of the Soviet regime at the invitation of a Soviet literary organization. The purpose of the trip is to report on the deportation of Korean Russians (displaced ethnic Koreans who had migrated to the Soviet Union) in 1937 from the Maritime Territory of Russia to Central Asia, which was at that time under the rule of the Soviet Union. During his travel, Choonsoo summons the past to recount unresolved ethical problems. Therefore, the title *Watershed Above* refers to a space where a number of ethical dilemmas are to be resolved. The novel has a complex structure with multiple narratives intersecting with each other. There are seven major interlocking narratives and they appear in the following order: 1) the narrative of the early period of the immigration of Koreans from the Soviet Union to Central Asia, 2) the narrative of the persecution many ethnic minorities suffered in the Soviet Union under Stalin's regime, 3) the narrative of Choonsoo's father who saved his family's life following the defeat of Japan in the Pacific War, but left all other relatives behind, 4) the narrative

of North Korean students who criticized the North Korean regime and took refuge in the Soviet Union, 5) the narrative of Choonsoo and his Korean lover Sakurai whom he met in Germany, 6) the narrative of ethnic Koreans in Japan split into two political camps, the Pro-Pyeongyang and the Pro-Seoul camp as an epitome of the divided homeland, and 7) the narrative of the collapse of communism in 1989. Among the seven major narratives, the deportation of the Korean Russians, the persecution by Stalin, the suffering of the Korean Japanese because of their divided homeland, and the collapse of communism all belong to the collective narrative of Koreans as an ethnic minority group. The narrative of the father, the narrative of the North Korean students in exile, and the love affair of Choonsoo are, in contrast, personal narratives. The collective and personal narratives intertwine with each other to form a complex plot. The various sufferings and ethical struggles of the ethnic Koreans uprooted from their homeland are rendered neutrally by the author, detached from his own position as a Korean Japanese.

Choonsoo agonizes over the choice of his father who upon the defeat of imperial Japan in World War II, fled to Japan with just his own family leaving all other relatives behind. Due to the behavior of the father, the son feels morally responsible for the abandonment of their relatives. In self-reflection, he believes that he was an accomplice in a betrayal. Further, as a collaborator of Japanese imperialism before the flight, the father was also a traitor to his own people. Choonsoo's guilt turns inwards and he remembers how as a child living on Sakhalin he had fully trusted in the victory of the Japanese empire. In the wake of Japan's defeat, the members of the family become Korean Japanese residents and suffer from moral guilt. The text includes reminiscences about guilt: "Nothing is more sinful than being innocent. They often say that at that time, they did not know anything at all, children and adults alike. That is actually a good excuse when one deceives others, or tries to evade responsibility. They are just like the adults who speak as if they didn't know that 'the Great East Asia War (the Pacific War)' was a war of aggression" (Ri 63, unless otherwise noted, all translations are ours). And the protagonist, having inherited the ethical burden of the father, bows down to the ground apologizing for "the secret escape of the Choonsoo's family from the island 34 years ago" (63). This episode points to the conflict many Korean Japanese face when they try to establish their own identity: they are torn between the loyalty to their homeland and to their fathers who are to blame for their situation. Immigration becomes even more complicated than usual when one not only moves to a foreign country and acquires a new nationality but also has to maintain a harmonious relationship with the native country because of cultural and personal factors. Choonsoo, and with him the children of many Korean Japanese immigrants, is also traumatized because of his father's betrayal of his home country during the colonial period. In addition, Cold War ideology and the question of allegiance to different Korean states drive a wedge between the minority groups: "Habitually, Korean residents in Japan think they are victims of discrimination and that is the basic assumption of their existence in Japan. Yet, you go on living in Japan and one day you forget about yourself as a victim of discrimination and find that you yourself have come to discriminate against those from the outside" (387). Such is the case when Korean Japanese adopt the negative stance many Japanese citizens have toward the Vietnamese refugees in their country. After all, to live as a Korean Japanese obliges to question one's own as well as the father's ethical responsibility, because it was the father who has imposed an unwanted life as a Korean Japanese on his family members. In *Watershed Above*, Choonsoo falls in love with a Korean woman in Germany, but abandons her. However, he is later overwhelmed by guilt for his action and thus carries on his shoulders the guilt of both his father's choices and his own. The father's guilt comes from abandoning his kinsmen and the son's lifelong hatred of his father turns on himself. As Choonsoo describes, "I cannot forgive father because he committed the sin of abandoning his relatives on Sakhalin" (243). But Choonsoo also recognizes that he "is now about to commit the same fault. Father, oh, father. Am I going to follow your path of sorrow?" (243). During his trip to the Soviet Union, he reflects upon his ethics using his father as a mirror. His debt manifests itself in poignant self-examination and self-criticism. The core theme of the story is that by reorienting himself in his relationship with his father, the son is reborn as a responsible ethical agent who is ready for the new future that unfolds with the end of the Cold War.

Kaneshiro's *GO* won the Naoki Prize in 2000, an award for popular fiction. Born in 1968 in Saitama Prefecture, Kazuki Kaneshiro went to a Pro-Pyeongyang middle school for Koreans and to a high school for Japanese before he graduated from the School of Law at Keio University. As a member of a new generation of Korean Japanese writers, he is influential among both Korean and Japanese readers. Younghi Lee praises the novel as marking "a turning point in the history of Korean-Japanese literature, bringing to light the 'traces' of the violence, persecution and discrimination against an ethnic minority that has long lived in the colonial allotments that were created in the modern history of Japan" (344). The title *Go* refers to the will of the protagonist who is freed from the ideological conflicts of the past generation of Korea and looks toward the future as a *jainichi* (在日), a Korean resident in Japan. Sugihara, the protagonist of the novel, attended a pro-Pyeongyang school because his father was Korean Japanese and a fervent Marxist. After the political conversion of his father, however, Sugihara switches to a Korean nationality and begins attending a Japanese high school. This makes him a misfit who is shunned by both native Japanese and pro-Pyeongyang Koreans. Yet, he eventually overcomes the difficulties he encounters and finds his own identity. Then one day he meets a Japa-

nese student called Sakurai and falls in love with her. Upon his confession that he is an ethnic Korean, Sakurai initially rejects him because of her own prejudices. The novel comes to a happy end, however, as she rejects her outlook and appreciates Sugihara as a human being. As mentioned above, the father's conversion is another essential thread in *GO*. Once a Marxist and active in the Pro-Pyeongyang Federation of Korean residents in Japan, the father suddenly changes his nationality from North Korean to South Korean. The story begins with Sugihara's monologue "Hawaii": "It was on the New Year's Day of my 14th year that my father mentioned 'Hawaii' for the first time. There was a New Year special program on TV featuring 3 pretty actresses arriving at Hawaii and exclaiming one after another, 'So pretty! Gorgeous! So cool!' Incidentally, we had, up to that time, regarded 'Hawaii' as a symbol of corrupt capitalism" (5). Hawaii has been a preferred destination of Japanese during the heyday of the Japanese bubble economy of the 1980s and many young white-collar workers were traveling there. Until the early 1990s when the Japanese economy worsened and Hawaii no longer played a culturally symbolic role, for the Japanese the island represented a place where consumer capitalism and post-modernity could coexist. Viewed in this context, it is significant that *GO* underlines this connotation of Hawaii at the opening of the novel (see Kim, Jooyoung 50).

The narrator tells us that Sugihara's father changes his nationality to South Korean because the North Korean passport would hinder him from traveling abroad. Why did the father try to travel to Hawaii at the risk of being called a traitor to the ethnic identity of the group he belonged to? As is revealed later on, the father gives up his cherished ideology to give the son an opportunity to go out into the "wider world" (14). In order to relate a narrative of the conflict that one has to go through as a non-Japanese resident in Japan, the novel uses the voice of a Korean Japanese youth: Sugihara has grown up as a member of a minority group, familiar with discrimination ever since his childhood at a Korean school. Owing to his rebellious spirit against discrimination, he is a problem child at school and is beaten by his father every time he causes trouble. He grows up as a delinquent boy while learning boxing from his father, a former boxer. Because he later chooses to go to a Japanese school, he is branded as traitor by his former friends and teachers, but he does not care. He explains this distance by saying that he "was not so much absorbed in the Communist ideology. North Korea, Marxism, the Pro-Pyeongyang Federation and Korean school—all this was none of my concern. I just had to adapt to the environment forced upon me and manage to survive in it. But it was an environment that I could not make head or tail of, so I could not help growing up a delinquent with a crooked mind. Don't you think it is rather strange to not become like that?" (12). The environment of which he "could not make head or tail" is inherited from his father. To break out of that environment Sugihara goes on to a Japanese school and works hard to find his own identity through reading extensively about anthropology and Nietzsche. Once the ethical conflict arising from the division of his homeland is resolved by the father, Sugihara proceeds to define an identity of his own, an identity which is in contrast to that of a Japanese living in Japan. He rejects the myth of a single-race nation and becomes convinced that blood ties represent an unethical imposition by the Japanese (i.e., citizenship based on the concept of *ius sanguini* as opposed to *ius soli*). *GO* is a coming-of-age novel: a young man who finds his own course by practicing ethics which despite his delinquency is almost puritanical. As pointed out earlier, the father does all he can to avoid handing down his ethical conflicts to the son. Yet, the son tries to free himself from all ideologies of nation, society, or politics, which have so far served as tools for securing an identity in a foreign land. Sugihara seems to have conveyed his ethical stance to Sakurai. Unrelenting at first in her prejudice against Koreans, she makes an unexpected turn and affirms her love for Sugihara. When we consider the initial stance of her views, the change of attitude is abrupt. This leaves something to be desired because there is no adequate description of the struggle that must have unfolded in her mind. Nonetheless, this narrative flaw is offset by the pressing message delivered by the narrative of Sugihara.

Korean Japanese are bound to face the question of how to define themselves. They, who have inherited from their fathers' generation a double conflict: that of having been born in a country where they suffer from discrimination and that of being divided into two hostile groups, pro-North and pro-South Koreans. This is the reason why an important narrative device for them is the question of ethics: "Born into a wealthy nation and family, / I made trouble and was kicked by father./ Proud of the life I have lived, / Yet letting go, I always degenerate into a beaten dog / I was born in Japan/ I was born in Japan" (17). The "I" asks "who am I?" and writes its own narrative based on, yet also in opposition, to the father's role model. That is the reason why Watershed Above and *GO*, autobiographically inspired works, capitalize on the theme of ethics inherited from a father's generation. This peculiar ethical controversy between fathers and sons can be seen as a distinctive literary device we find in the narratives of Korean Japanese authors. Compared to Watershed Above, *GO*, a popular bestseller, is light and simple. Still, *GO* as a love story about a Korean Japanese boy and a Japanese girl, is replete with ethical questions arising from the life of Korean residents in Japan. Through the voice of Sakurai, the narrator says: "Since I was a child, father has always told me, that I should never go out with a Korean or Chinese man" (178) and remembers that "he told me Koreans and Chinese people have dirty blood" (179). By disclosing how she had internalized discrimination, Sakurai experiences the incompatibility between her father's ethics and hers.



In closing, we return to the poignant self-examination of the protagonist in Watershed Above which holds that a Korean Japanese is a person who suffers from discrimination and at the same time discriminates against others. Korean Japanese fiction is a narrative that folds these choices back on oneself. This ultimately connects with the universal theme of literature, namely that novels urge their readers to reexamine their own ethics when they encounter others and their ethics.

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Authors' profile: Inseop Shin teaches Japanese literature at Konkuk University. His interests in scholarship include East Asian literature and diaspora literature. In addition to numerous articles, his book publications include *일본근현대문학의 명암* (2009) (Light and Dark of Modern and Contemporary Japanese Literature).  
E-mail: <[seoha@konkuk.ac.kr](mailto:seoha@konkuk.ac.kr)>

Authors' profile: Jooyoung Kim teaches Japanese literature at Konkuk University. Her interests in scholarship include Japanese literature and diaspora and multicultural studies. Her recent articles include "韩国的日本近现代文学研究动向" ("Trends of Studies on Modern and Contemporary Japanese Literature in Korea"), *Foreign Literature Studies* (2015) and "韓國多元文化文學解釋的展望-以孫洪奎小說和河鐘五詩文化的多元文化想象力?中心" ("New Horizon for the Interpretation of Multicultural Literature in Korea: Multicultural Imagination in Son Hong-gyu's Novel and Ha Jong-oh's Poetic Literature," *Universitas: Monthly Review of Philosophy and Culture* (2015).  
E-mail: <[jooyoki@konkuk.ac.kr](mailto:jooyoki@konkuk.ac.kr)>