

Japanese Women Becoming Obsessed with South Korean TV Dramas

Actors Contribute to Mutual Understanding Between the Two Countries

By Kurosawa Tsuneo



Photo: REUTERS • SUN

Bae Yong Joon smiles before thousands of screaming fans who welcomed him at Tokyo's Narita Airport

A South Korean TV drama series is on the verge of demolishing the spiritual barrier that has existed between Japan and South Korea. It may sound a bit of an overstatement but given middle-aged Japanese women's infatuation with "Winter Sonata" starring Bae Yong Joon, or "Yong-sama" as he is affectionately known in Japan, I take it to be possible.

"Winter Sonata" has succeeded in capturing the hearts of middle-aged women nationwide. Not satisfied with merely watching the show, many are going out of their way to travel to South Korea and visit location sites or even start learning Korean. It can be said that the rift between the two nations is closing psychologically with the aid of the program.

"Winter Sonata" depicts a love story about two high school sweethearts who were separated and then reunited 10 years later by a chance meeting. The drama, which scored huge ratings in South Korea, has repeatedly been aired in Japan, where it has enjoyed a large following since 2003.

When Bae arrived at New Tokyo International Airport last November on a promotional tour, some 3,500 screaming fans, mostly women in their 40s and 50s, greeted him, many carrying large portraits of their heartthrob. Such scenes were repeatedly

televised, leading to the fans themselves stealing the public spotlight.

On the opening day of an exhibition of Bae's photographs, hundreds of women flocked to the entrance of the hotel where Bae was staying. When he came out of the entrance a stampede occurred as fans tried to catch a glimpse of the actor, and several were injured. When asked at a news conference later why, even though confusion was anticipated, he openly left through the entrance instead of sneaking out of the back, Bae replied that he could hardly ignore his fans who had waited for him all night. It was this gentleness and sincerity that whipped up the women's passion toward him.

Even in a country said to be relatively safe, it is quite surprising to most people for housewives to spend all night outside a hotel. Various explanations for the mass swooning over Bae have been offered. One theory goes that most Japanese middle-aged women, who have devoted themselves to their families and

are finished with child rearing and have plenty of time on their hands, enjoy imagining themselves as the heroine of the drama as if they were experiencing their first love again.

The fans' activities are not limited to Japan but extend to Bae's home country as well. One survey shows that the average number of Japanese tourists visiting South Korea per month has jumped to 26,000 in the aftermath of the airing of "Winter Sonata." The ripple effect of the "Yong-sama Boom" to the South Korean economy amounted to 1.19 trillion won in 2004. It has also generated as much as ¥120 billion for the Japanese economy. Both figures are equivalent to some \$1.2 billion each.

It was difficult to deepen mutual understanding between Japan and South Korea, partly because of Japan's earlier colonization of the Korean peninsula. Japanese previously had less interest in South Korea than in America and Europe even though it is a neighboring country. Likewise, the country's popularity among Japanese as a tourist destination was much lower than Western countries.

Now, Bae's fans in Japan will hopefully alter the trend and help usher in a new closer relationship with South Korea. **JS**

Kurosawa Tsuneo is Chief Editor in the Cultural News Section of Kyodo News.