



Japan's Aging Crisis and Masahiro Kobayashi's Film Trilogy:

Haru's Journey (2010), *Japan's Tragedy* (2013), and *Lear on the Shore* (2016)

By

Hisao Oshima

Kyushu University

Japan

Abstract

Masahiro Kobayashi's Film Trilogy, *Haru's Journey* (2010), *Japan's Tragedy* (2013), and *Lear on the Shore* (2016), focus on Japan's most serious social issue of aging, featuring Tatsuya Nakadai, the most famous Shakespearean actor in Japan. This paper examines how Kobayashi probes into issues of the aging Japanese society, especially those of families, with the three old protagonists: Tadao, Fujio Murai, Chokitsu Kuwabata. Playing the roles, Nakadai, also fighting against negative effects of the aging process, revealed serious issues of aging through his versatile performances captured by Kobayashi's masterful filmic direction.

Keywords: Masahiro Kobayashi, Tatsuya Nakadai, Japan's Issues of Aging, *Haru's Journey*, *Japan's Tragedy*, *Lear on the Shore*

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Elon Musk recently tweeted “Japan will disappear” about its extremely low birth rate (29 February 2024). The issue is closely linked with another serious problem of the Japanese society: aging. As *The Economist* reports on the “inverted pyramid” of Japan’s rapidly aging population, aging is one of its most serious social issues, a crisis in the structure and function of society (*The Economist*, November 2021, 32). Developments in medicine have made people live much longer while the number of childbirths is decreasing alarmingly in Japan because of the nation’s bad economy and poor social environment for childcare. As a result, fewer and fewer young people support more and more elderly people. The traditional social and familial support and care systems have collapsed for a long time because of the nuclearization of family in modern Japan. According to the journal’s population research, the number of the elderly people more than 65 years old in 2010 was approximately 29,580,000, which is a bit less than the total population of Canada: 34,110,000.¹ Compared with those of other nations, Japan’s aging rate (the percentage of the population over 65 years) is the highest in the world, reaching 23.1% in 2012 which categorizes Japan into “a super-aging society” (more than 21%). The Japanese Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication reports that the rate is still increasing and is 29% in 2023.²

Scenario Writer and Director Masahiro Kobayashi (1954-2022), once a folksong singer, established a film production company Monkey Town Productions in 1996.³ After his death, his wife is operating the company, preserving and spreading Kobayashi’s filmic legacy. As you see in the filmography and festival & award pages in its official website, he was one of the most conspicuous Japanese directors at international film festivals held in Cannes, Moscow, Budapest, Chicago, Oslo, New York, Singapore, and so on. Though he mainly made art films, they were targeted at the commercial market, and his films sharply focused on Japan’s serious social issues, especially those of family. The director, however, suffered from cancer and died in 2022. In his final years, he made the film trilogy, featuring Nakadai as their heroes and focusing on Japan’s aging crisis: *Haru’s Journey* (2010), *Japan’s Tragedy* (2013) and *Lear on the Shore* (2016).⁴

Akira Kurosawa found Tatsuya Nakadai as a promising young actor when Nakadai was learning his actor's art in Haiyu-za's training school. Haiyu-za is one of the major New Drama (Western style) companies staging Chekov, Ibsen, Shakespeare, and Japanese New Drama dramatists. Nakadai first appeared as a walk-through in Kurosawa's film *Yojinbo*, but he soon started to play major title roles of Shakespeare on stage, created his own company "Mumeijuku" [Company of Anonymous Actors], and got great success in films and TV drama programs. When he played the role of old Hidetora (Japanized Lear) in Kurosawa's *Ran* in 1985, he was 53; he spent almost half a day for the make-up to become the mad old man.⁵ Such special make-up, however, is now no more necessary for him. Nakadai is now "Fourscore and upward" (*King Lear*, 4.6.54) struggling as an actor with the aging process himself, in fact, 91 years old in 2024. Last year, he made a successful tour of *Barrymore*, which also focuses on an aging actor relying on "the shaky ability... to remember his lines."⁶ Recently NHK produced a TV documentary program about the great actor; he is now widely regarded as an antiaging hero, issuing many books on acting and aging.⁷

Haru's Journey (*Journey with Haru* is closer to its original title *Haru tono Tabi* and its French one *Le Voyage avec Haru*) is a road film about an old man and his granddaughter: Tadao and Haru. Kobayashi published its novel version as a book in the same year.⁸ Eri Tokunaga played the role of Haru and got 2 prestigious Japanese awards for new actress while Nakadai played the role of the selfish old man who had sacrificed his family to get a lot of money in fishing herring. When Haru is fired from her job at a school, which closes due to the decreasing number of children in the area, Tadao decides to leave her, thinking he is a great burden for her. Haru rejects her grandfather's decision and follows him, and they start a travel to see his relatives and ask them for some help. Teruyo Nogami, one of Akira Kurosawa's most important staff, compares the relationship between the old man and his granddaughter with that of Lear and Cordelia in her note in its film program.⁹ Kobayashi, who respected Kurosawa very much, might have been much pleased with Nogami's comparison.

The film asks us an important question “Who should care for the elderly?” which is now causing serious personal, familial, social, and political issues in Japan. There’re certainly the care system and many facilities for the elderly, but not all of the elderly have been enjoying them with happy satisfaction. We daily witness sad testimonies about the issues in newspapers and TV news: suicides and lonely deaths of elderly people, even murders of aging parents by their sons and daughters, and suicides of the caring children who suffer physically and mentally from their hard situations of caring. Now the issue of “*Row Row Kaigo*” [elderly children caring more elderly parents] has been becoming a serious problem in Japan.

Japan’s Tragedy is a dark story about the dying old father and his son much in trouble in his life.¹⁰ Their tragic story is captured mainly in black & white. Kobayashi featured popular great actors and actresses: Nakadai as the father (Fujio Murai), Ikki Kitamura as his son, Shinobu Terashima as his wife and so on. Kobayashi got the idea of this film from a real incident in 2010: a daughter who had relied on his father’s pension for livelihood hid his death to continue getting his pension unlawfully. Reading the news story, as Kobayashi noted, he made this film as if it were his own testament or dying message, being aware of his approaching death.

The son got married happily but his business went wrong, resulting in his mental collapse. The young couple had a baby but they were divorced. Recovering from mental depression, however, he comes home to see his father, who is diagnosed as suffering from fatal cancer. The father’s pension is their livelihood, so the dying old man decides to shut him up in his room completely locked and to starve to death. Fujio tells his son to keep his death secret to get the pension. Dying Fujio remembers the past happy days with the family whose scenes are presented in color in this film, in contrast with monochrome scenes of the dark present situation.

In Buddhism, it was believed that great monks kept fasting in the special ceremonial way to die and become a Buddha. In this modern world, however, the father kills himself in a similar way to accomplish a pension fraud for his son. The black subtitle at the end of the film appears saying “In

2010, the number of suicides is 31,560. The number of the dead and missing in the Eastern Japan Great Earthquake and Tsunami is about 20,000.” That is Kobayashi’s message: social issues, including those of mental illness, aging, and poverty, kill far more people than the catastrophic great natural disaster in Japan.

What gives relief to the watcher is the box containing his bones on the table in the last scene; his son gets a job and dully reports his death to stop his pension, cremating his father’s body. But the real world shows a more hard fact. Asahi Newspaper reports on its front page: “The number of lone deaths of more than 65 years old people is about 68,000 per year” in Japan.¹¹

In his last film, Kobayashi examined issues of aging in Japan from a Shakespearean angle. 31 years since Kurosawa’s *Ran*, Nakadai played another Japanese Lear role at the age of 84: Chokitsu Kuwabata. The retired old star actor had two daughters: Yukiko he got with his wife and Nobuko with his lover. Apparently, Chokitsu’s family mirrors Lear’s one: Yukiko (Gonerill) [Mieko Harada], Nobuko (Cordelia) [Hana Kuroki], and Yukio (Albany) [Hiroshi Abe]. Chokitsu suffering from senile dementia wandered out from the nursing home for the elderly. Yukiko and her husband tried to get all their father’s money, great house and land, putting him into the “prison” on the lonely northern seaside far from his house in the city. Always dreaming about his glorious days as film actor, Chokitsu escaped from it and appeared from the dark abysm of the tunnel to the northern seashore at the start of the film; it seemed that he came from the glorious past to the hard present as if it were the time tunnel.

Nobuko (Cordelia) is anxious about her missing father and comes to the beach looking for him. When she finds him, however, he cannot recognize her, asking “Who are you?” The shooting location is Chirihama Drive Way in Noto where you can drive cars on the seashore for several miles. Noto is also the place of Mumeijuku’s summer training where Nakadai and his wife often stayed with their student actors. Kobayashi wrote the script to dedicate it to Nakadai, according to whom the director jokingly asked him what would happen to the great actor if he suffer from senile dementia.¹² This film is, in a sense, Kobayashi’s psychological experiment to probe into the aging star’s mind.

The claustrophobic scene of family reunion in the car where Nobuko and Yukio on the front seats talk about their past family life with Chokitsu eating a bento and then napping on the back seems to capture the isolated and compartmentalized situation of family in present Japan, which makes it more difficult to care for the elderly family members.

Chokitsu did not play the role of Lear in his actor's career. Maybe paying respect to Kurosawa or simply having no chance, Nakadai also did not play the role of Lear on stage. So Chokitsu/Nakadai performs the role of Lear alone on the beach as if it were his final stage. When he speaks his last words, he falls flat there, just like Lear in his final moment; it seems he is attempting to drown himself. On the film's closing screen, however, we see Nobuko forcefully rescuing him from the sea. We don't know what will happen to him but some sea-change is hinted at the end any way. Maybe it is Kobayashi's message in this film: how hard the real world is, younger generations are a source of hope for the future and they are responsible for the important mission to care for their elderly members. In a sense, Chokitsu is a modern Hidetora, a Japanese Lear time-traveled to the present world; he is an avatar of the aging great actor and director themselves.

With Nakadai's powerful performance of realism, Kobayashi in the three films psychologically probes the crises of Japanese families: Tadao, poverty-stricken old man, making his last journey with Haru for help, Fujio dying from cancer attempting to starve to death to save his son by pension fraud, and Chokitsu (another Japanese Lear) suffering from dementia and trying to escape from his "prison". The trilogy on aging is, in a sense, the testament of the director, himself facing old age and death, for younger generations.

Notes

1. Takao Suzuki, *Cho-Koreishakai no Kisochoishiki* [Basic Knowledge about the Super-Aging Society] (Kodansha, 2012), pp. 13-14.
2. Statistics Bureau of Japan on the Japanese population more than 65 years old:
<https://www.stat.go.jp/data/topics/topi1321.html>.
3. See Masahiro Kobayashi, *Film Director Masahiro Kobayashi's Diary* (Monkey Town, 2006), the official website of *Monkey Town Productions*, and Chapter 5 "Film Director Masahiro Kobayashi" in *Tamashii no Shigotonin* [Soulful Professionals] (Kawadeshobo Shinsha, 2008), pp.83-98.
4. These films are available in DVDs: *Haru tono Tabi* [Haru's Journey] (Toei Video, 2010); *Japan's Tragedy* (Toei Video, 2012); *Hamabe no Lear* [Lear on the Shore] (Culture Publishers, 2016).
5. Tatsuya Nakadai, "Interview on Kurosawa" (NHK TV program broadcast on 24 December 2001).
6. William Luce, *Barrymore* (Samuel French, 1996), p. 12.
7. *Tatsuya Nakadai: Facing His Life* (NHK TV documentary broadcast in 2017). As for his books, *Nokoshigaki* [Testament] (Chuo Koron-sha, 2010); *Yakusha nanka Oyamenasai* [Quit Being an Actor] (Sun Post, 2017); *Enjiru kotowa Ikirukoro* [Acting is Living] (PHP, 2018); *Karada Hitotsu* [Only One Body] (Harumeku, 2018).
8. Kobayashi, *Haru tono Tabi* (Mainichi Newspaper Publications, 2010). See also "Hito: Masahiro Kobayashi" in *Subaru* (Shueisha, June 2010), pp. 232-35.
9. *Nokoshigaki*, p. 270.
10. The film's script is published in *Scenario* (Japan Writers Guild, September 2013), pp. 91-116.
11. *Asahi Newspaper* (16 March 2024 ; Morning Edition).
12. *Scenario* (Japan Writers Guild, July 2017), pp. 4-11.