

***Re-Heating Hope through Recognition in Japanese Late Capitalism:
A Sociological Analysis of Ryo Asai's The Kirishima Thing***

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Abstract

How is invisible power exerted through recognition? By adopting David Harvey's social theory of postmodernity and Kazuo Seiyama's argument of power, this paper analyses Ryo Asai's movie *The Kirishima Thing* (*Kirishima-Bukatsu-Yamerutteyo*). Although the movie portrays daily life in a high school, the absence of the main character, Kirishima, throughout the entire film leaves it open to various interpretations. The interpretation put forward in this paper is that the movie depicts the exertion of power through mutual recognition to forcefully generate a sense of hope in the age of Japanese late capitalism. This article addresses the following two points. First, Kirishima's absence means that the students lack a source of reassurance, which adds to the dim prospects for their future. In this movie, recognition is achieved through engaging in Bukatsu: extracurricular club activities. Second, the Japanese expression '[...] katsu,' i.e. '[...] activities' is an ideology of 'reheating', which forces people to be enthusiastic about certain kinds of activities and attempts to recover a sense of hope. As there are an increasing number of similar expressions in Japanese, e.g. Kon-katsu [searching for a marriage partner] and Shu-katsu [job-hunting], power is exerted in a form of participation that aims to create a certain relationship with others. This paper is a pioneering attempt to examine literary works and movies by applying Harvey's theory and Seiyama's argument. The presentation also constitutes the first analysis of Ryo Asai's work that deals with the theme of generating hope through recognition.

Keywords: David Harvey, hope, Japan, movie, postmodernity, power, recognition, Ryo Asai, sociology.

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I. Introduction

How is invisible power exerted in the age of postmodernity in Japanese late capitalism? This paper analyses the sociological implications of Ryo Asai's movie *The Kirishima Thing* (*Kirishima-Bukatsu-Yamerutteyo*) and proposes that it depicts one form of exertion of power: the forceful generation of hope through recognition among Japanese younger generations (particularly high-school and university students). Although the movie portrays daily life in a high school, the absence of Kirishima (the captain of the volleyball team) throughout the entire film leaves it open to various interpretations. This article aims to examine such exertion of power through recognition and to evaluate its socio-cultural meanings and outcomes, by investigating the sociological implications of the movie.

Ryo Asai's popularity was recently established thanks to this movie, which is based on Asai (2010).¹ Asai's work commonly deals with teenagers and university students who are confronted with an unpredictable future, sometimes at the turning point of their lives, in the absence of significant individuals who give them existential reassurance. Asai's work can be classified into the following two categories:

- 1) School life: the works in this category describe the students' multiple perceptions of realities in the same social space: high school or university campus. The topics vary from job-hunting to school cultural festivals, extracurricular activities, and the high-school graduation ceremony (Asai 2012a, 2012b, 2011b, 2010).
- 2) Loss of father: the literature in this classification deals with the sudden loss of a father (sometimes accompanied by the loss of an elder sister). The widowed mother brings a new partner to the house after a year, and this incident leaves the main character (her son) mentally shocked. (Asai 2013, 2011a).

The notable characteristic of Asai's works is the usage of ensemble casting: a technique that is also used by some other Japanese writers. This technique leaves his works open to various interpretations from each character's perspective. Readers can decide who is the main character according to his/her interpretations.

This paper constitutes the first comprehensive analysis of Asai's work. Current accounts of Asai's literary works and the movie are limited to short explanations. In relation to this movie, some brief reviews introduce it as a story of '*school caste* (social hierarchy among students in the Japanese school)' and also explain that the division of students in the classroom is an analogy of class stratification in society (Furuichi and Yoshida 2012; Mizuno and Osawa 2013:280-4; Osawa 2012). Osawa (2012) also points out that Kirishima is synonymous with a god, since Kirishima is in the centre of school activities and is counted on by students. Furuichi and Asai (2014) exchange ideas on the current socio-cultural situations of Japanese younger generations (mainly high-school and university students) in a newspaper article by

¹ Asai (2010), the original literary work behind this movie, was awarded the 22nd Subaru Literature Rookie Award. In addition, the movie was awarded the 36th Japan Academy Award (Award for Best Picture, Directing, Film Editing, and Writing Original Screenplay), the Japanese Movie of Excellence Award, Mainichi Movie Competition's Best Directing Award, Yokohama Movie Festival's Directing Award, and the Japanese Best Picture Award.

referencing some scenes in the movie. Asai's works depict the socio-cultural situation of Japanese high-school and university students, with particular emphasis on the perplexed human subjects faced with an unpredictable future. Thus, Asai's works are worth sociological attention.

In contrast to the current interpretation of the movie, which focuses on students' hierarchy in the school, this paper interprets the movie's socio-cultural implication, namely the exertion of power. In order to achieve this goal, this article adopts social theoretical perspectives rather than using literary theories. In particular, David Harvey's examination of postmodernity and Kazuo Seiyama's argument of power are useful as a framework of analysis.² Harvey's examination of postmodernity, as shown in Harvey (1990a=1999, 1990b, 1989), has been discussed in sociological and critical urban geographical studies, but not in literary analysis, even though these studies mention literary works in their arguments. Moreover, Seiyama's interpretation of power has not been applied in literary analysis either. Thus, this investigation also constitutes the first examination of a literary work that adopts the arguments of Harvey and Seiyama.

The concept of recognition has been mainly discussed in political philosophy, but it has been given increasing attention in sociology in recent years. The definition of this concept is not necessarily strict, but thinkers share the following definition: giving a person a sense of being valuable through affirmative understanding and acceptance of his/her existence (cf. Honneth 2000=2005; Miyadai 2013:24-7, 34-6). Researchers have used the term flexibly, and this paper adopts a similar usage of this concept.

The contents of this paper follow: first, the article conducts textual analysis of *The Kirishima Thing*. It might seem that the main characters of this movie are Ryoya (the director of the movie club) and Kasumi (a member of the badminton club) as these two individuals are featured in the poster and advertisement for this film. However, this investigation regards Hiroki (a former member of the baseball club) as the main character. Second, this paper analyses the sociological implications of the movie. It interprets the film as a story of students' resignation towards their unpredictable future when it is increasingly difficult to feel a sense of hope. In this situation, students must forcefully 'reheat' and remotivate themselves to look for a sense of hope by engaging in *Bukatsu* [extracurricular club activities]. This section states that the expressions [...] *katsu* and [...] *ryoku* are a manifestation of exertion of power and interprets them as 'the ideologies of reheating'.

² Taylor and Lang (2004) criticise the explosion of small paradigms among sociological examinations. They propose that sociologists should conduct an innovative investigation based on alternative research methods. This paper uses the word postmodernity, as other terms do not necessarily show significant differences in their meanings (e.g. liquid modernity [Bauman 2000]). This applies to the usage of the concept of recognition in this paper.

II. Multiple Realities Portrayed in *The Kirishima Thing*

1. Formation of Groups among Students

The movie is classified into two parts. The first half is used for the entire portrayal of school life from multiple perspectives, focusing on 'Friday' to the following 'Tuesday'. The latter half of the film shows the unexpected communications between students' groups that are caused by the absence of Kirishima.

The characters in the movie can be divided into two large groups and six small groups. The first large group is the one under direct influence from Kirishima: the volleyball club and the 'going-home' club (*kitaku-bu*). The second large group is the one which Kirishima indirectly influences: the movie club, the badminton club, the brass-band club, and the baseball club. Based on this group classification, this section is devoted to the textual analysis of the contents.

2. On a Group under Direct Influence from Kirishima

1) The Volleyball Club

Kirishima is the captain and is in the position of 'libero'. Kirishima's membership as a player in the volleyball team representing the Kanto region shows his notable volleyball skills. However, because of Kirishima's absence, Fusuke replaces him in the position of 'libero'. Fusuke is happy about this unexpected chance to participate in the game. Although this emotion is not portrayed in the movie, it is articulated in the original novel version. However, Fusuke cannot perform well enough to distinguish himself in the actual competition. This failure causes him to receive harsh criticism from other teammates during the practice after being defeated in the competition. As a result, Fusuke shouts during the practice, 'no matter how much I do, this is all I can do!' Kirishima has been acclaimed by many students even outside the volleyball club activity, but Fusuke cannot get such positive recognition and evaluation from the team members.

2) The Going-Home Club

The purpose of the going-home club's 'activity' is to wait for Kirishima to go to cram school together. Hiroki and two other members of the going-home club play basketball together after school. When the news of Kirishima's absence is spreading, these three students are chatting about their *raison d'être*, as to whether they are superior to other students who engage in extracurricular club activities. Hiroki says, as if putting an end to the discussion, 'After all, the superior person can do everything, but the inferior people cannot achieve anything'. Two other members show envy and jealousy towards Hiroki, and they feel their limitations in having a sense of superiority to others.

3. On a Group that Kirishima Indirectly Influences

1) The Movie Club

Mainly two students, Ryoya and Takefumi, are featured in the movie. At the beginning, the movie club's original work, 'You wipe away my burning tears (*Kimiyo-fuke-bokuno-atsui-namida-wo*)', receives a prize in the competition called 'Eiga Koshien (All-Japan high-school movie competition)'. The movie was shot and

acted by the students of the movie club, but the supervisor of the club wrote the scenario. Ryoya and Takefumi are praised for their achievement in front of all the students in their school meeting, but the title of the film is laughed at by the entire audience. Ryoya and Takefumi appear awkward and not to be enjoying the atmosphere.

Ryoya and Takefumi are familiar with topics related to movies and construct their own world through movies, though they usually do not communicate with other classmates. The supervisor of the club tells them to make a film dealing with topics related to student life, such as love, romance, friendship, and studying. Since the teacher wrote the former film, 'You wipe away my burning tears', Ryoya and Takefumi make up their minds to create their own film, one that they truly want to shoot. Takefumi encourages Ryoya, saying, 'you cannot step back. You must do it'. They decide to start shooting a zombie film, titled 'The Dead Student Representatives (*Seitokai-of-the-dead*)'. Even though they are not considered to be a popular group in the classroom, they show a sense of compassion for and recognition of each other.

2) The Badminton Club

This badminton club is in a unique position in the school. Mika and Kasumi show compassion for and recognition of the less privileged individuals, namely Fusuke and Ryoya.³ First, Mika silently understands Fusuke's situation and stops him from going to find Kirishima in a later scene in the movie. Second, Kasumi also silently supports the activities of the movie club. Even though the entire school scoffs at Ryoya's achievement, Kasumi does not look down on Ryoya. Although Ryoya's crush on Kasumi ends when he witnesses her together with her boyfriend in the classroom, Kasumi silently supports the activities of the movie club in the final part of the movie by hitting Sana, who looks down on the movie club.

3) The Brass-band Club

Aya, the director of the brass-band club, is the only character featured among the band members. She practises playing saxophone on the school's roof and in front of the science building, in order to look at Hiroki. This arouses conflict between Aya and the movie club. Aya is asked by Ryoya to vacate the place where she is playing saxophone so that he can shoot his movie, but she refuses, saying, 'this is serious practice'. Aya already senses that she cannot be Hiroki's girlfriend, and she is forced to give up this ambition when she witnesses Hiroki being kissed by Sana. During the conflict over places for practising her instrument, Aya also says to Ryoya, 'this is the final time', meaning that she wants to give up her crush on Hiroki and to successfully complete her duties as director of the brass-band club as the day of retirement approaches.

4) The Baseball Club

Hiroki uses a baseball bag when commuting, which indicates that he used to be a member of baseball club. The captain of the baseball club continuously approaches Hiroki to participate in the game, but he does not criticise Hiroki's absence and

³ Even though Mika and Kasumi associate with Risa and Sana, they keep their distance from them. Risa and Sana rely strongly on the presence of Kirishima. Mika and Kasumi also show a sarcastic attitude towards and slightly scoff at perplexed Risa in the absence of Kirishima. Mika also explains her activities at the badminton club as 'just for the sake of entering university easier' to them, but Mika tells Kasumi that she indeed likes playing badminton.

sabotage. After being approached by the captain several times, Hiroki asks why the captain does not retire from baseball-club activities even in autumn, since the third-year students are generally supposed to retire from club activities after completing competitions in the summer season. The captain's reply is that he is to continue 'until the draft-picking season ends' but that professional baseball-team scouts are not attempting to recruit him at that moment. Hiroki witnesses the captain practising alone in the public park afterwards, but Hiroki hides himself to avoid communicating with him.

4. On the Roof of the School

Although the first hour of the movie is used for portraying the groups and their own extracurricular activities, the situation suddenly changes in the final hour, when one member of the going-home club finds someone who looks like Kirishima on the roof of the school building. Every student in the movie, except those in the brass-band club and the movie club, starts running to the roof once the news is heard. In this scene, the brass-band club starts practising Elsa's Procession to the Cathedral, which is the only background music in the entire film.

The people who get together on the roof start arguing with each other. When the members of the volleyball club and the badminton club are running to the roof, the movie club is shooting the film. In this scene, the movie club does not seem to have identified the existence of Kirishima on the roof. Kubo from the volleyball club kicks away the stone that the movie club is using for filmmaking after realising that Kirishima is not there. Kubo and Ryoya are about to start fighting physically. Although Fusuke tries to stop Kubo from resorting to violence, he does so out of concern that the volleyball club might not be able to participate in the competition because of this incident. This shows that Fusuke is not sympathetic to the movie club. In addition, Kasumi hits Sana when Sana provokes Kubo to attack Ryoya. Ryoya directs the members of the movie club to start shooting the scene in the zombie movie when predators (acted by the movie-club members) eat and kill benign students (the volleyball-club members). This conflict between students ends with mutual rejection, without apology.

After the conflict between the movie club and the volleyball club, Hiroki picks up a lens cover from Ryoya's camera. The lens cover removes the barrier of communication between them. Their conversation starts when Hiroki taps Ryoya's shoulder, though these two individuals do not talk to each other. In the original novel version, Hiroki becomes tense and nervous when attempting to talk to Ryoya, though the novel does not explain the reason clearly. Hiroki asks if Ryoya is going to be a movie director, but Ryoya's answer, that he already feels that he cannot be a professional movie director in the future, surprises Hiroki. Ryoya also answers, 'I feel I am connected to the world when I shoot a film. The sun is sinking, but we have to survive in this world no matter what'. Hiroki starts crying with 'burning tears' at this moment, saying 'I have had enough already'. Hiroki calls Kirishima on the phone, but he does not answer.

III. Sociological Implications of This Film: [...] *katsu* and [...] *ryoku* as ‘the Ideology of Reheating’

It is possible to interpret this movie as a story of resignation towards an unpredictable future if the viewer regards Hiroki as the main character. In other words, Hiroki is questioning the meaning of engaging in *Bukatsu* [extracurricular club activities] because he is not sure why students are enthusiastic and heated about *Bukatsu*, even though they are not necessarily related to their prospective career and other activities in the future. First, Fusuke already senses that he cannot take over Kirishima’s position satisfactorily and surpass him in volleyball performance. Second, two students in the going-home club also sense that they cannot exceed Hiroki’s performance and might not be able to achieve anything in their future. Third, Ryoya feels that he cannot be a movie director, even though his team was awarded a prize at a national level. Fourth, Aya gives up trying to get Hiroki as a partner. Fifth, the captain of the baseball club feels that he cannot be a professional baseball player. Kirishima’s absence and subsequent incidents reveal that the characters are resigned to their future. At this very moment, faced with an unpredictable future, it is also revealed that students are forcefully ‘reheating’ and remotivating themselves by engaging with *Bukatsu*.

In the era of late capitalism, it is increasingly difficult for people to predict the possible future of society. Thus, the prospects of people possessing a positive sense of hope are not certain (Beck 1986; Beck et al. 1994; Furuichi 2010). Hage (2009; 2003) points out that it was possible for society to give a sense of hope to its citizens. Although Hage (2009; 2003) does not give specific examples of such components of hope or under what kind of socio-economic formations they might exist, this article argues that the components of hope in this sense are the various chances (e.g. opportunities of employment and education) that enable people to foresee the prospective visions of their future through socio-economic growth. As Yamada (2004) also points out, stagnation of economic growth since the 1990s in Japan prompts questions concerning the meaning of being enthusiastic or ‘heated’.

There have been proliferating numbers of slogans and catchphrases in Japan to ‘reheat’ the motivation of the younger generation (particularly high-school and university students) under the socio-economic stagnation. The most notable examples in recent years are the expression [...] *katsu* ([...] activities), e.g. *Shu-katsu* [job-hunting] and *Kon-katsu* [seeking for marriage partner], and [...] *ryoku* ([...] abilities), e.g. *Joshi-ryoku* [some abilities that make an attractive girl], *Communication-no-ryoku* [an ability to have efficient communication skills], and *Gogaku-ryoku* [an ability to use foreign languages fluently]. Such expressions and slogans, as shown in [...] *katsu* and [...] *ryoku*, function as a mechanism to remotivate the will of the younger generation, and then serve to reorient them to the ‘desirable (*nozomashii*)’ disposition in order to maintain and reproduce the current social order. Machimura (2000) defines such a mechanism of remotivating people as ‘the ideology of reheating’: remotivating the people’s will in the same manner as switching on electric devices. If one successfully internalises the norms that are endorsed by such ‘activities’ and ‘abilities’, one is considered to be ‘shining (*kagayaku*)’ or ‘desirable (*nozomashii*)’, and such a one tends to receive positive recognition and evaluation from his/her peers.

It is true that remotivating the will of Japanese younger generations through such slogans would be useful for the sake of maintaining social order in the era of Japanese late capitalism, but such discursive compulsion is likely to confuse them and to increase their anxieties if there is no proper understanding of the actual contents and meaning of such ideology. The definitions of such ‘activities’ and ‘abilities’ consist of several elements, but they only explain certain aspects of a human subject. For instance, in *Shu-katsu* [job-hunting], certain abilities, such as communication skills (*Communication-no-ryoku*), the reputation of university graduated from (*Gaku-ryoku*), and desirable personality (*Ningen-ryoku*) are highly evaluated, but other personal characteristics are likely to be discarded from evaluation. The discourse on such ‘abilities’ and ‘activities’ is increasingly becoming powerful ideology that dictates the behaviour and disposition of Japanese younger generations.

The very moment when power is exerted among people is when there is acknowledgement and recognition of such discourse. The subject that exerts power tends to be ambiguous and diffused in the age of globalised late capitalism. Although Michel Foucault’s explanation of power is fragmented and not clear, the Foucauldian conception of power identifies the exertion of power in all the social fields (Foucault 1976:120). Based on Foucault’s explanation of power, Seiyama (2000:14-6) proposes that recognition and acknowledgement of the current order (i.e. ‘knowledge [*savoir*]’) itself is the moment when the power is exercised. Unlike the conventional conception of power that assumes a closed society in which the powerful sovereign exerts a physical influence over the citizens regardless of their will, as typically shown in Weber (1922=1960:8), Seiyama’s conception provides an alternative view of exertion of power in the age of globalised capitalism, when borders have become increasingly porous and the technology of sovereignty is more complicated than before.

In his argument on postmodernity, Harvey (1990a=1999:367-9) points out that the lifespan of every product is now shorter than before, and that the advent of lifestyle based on mass consumption and disposal of such products has impacted every social relation in that it is regarded as disposable as well.⁴ ‘Disposable’ social relations expand to the realm of ‘lifestyle, value, architecture, attachment to a place, and the mode of act and existence’ (Harvey 1990a=1999:376). This means that temporal agreements, rather than permanent institutional systems and contracts, play dominant roles in the life of postmodernity, and participation in the established and eternal things gets increasingly difficult (Harvey 1990a=1999:375). It becomes hard for people to feel a sense of being recognised in this situation. As Harvey (1990a=1999) also argues, the pursuit of eternity and stability gets conversely stronger as seen in the growing popularity of the new types of religions and communities, in search of a place where one is recognised.

The very moment when power is exerted is at the endorsement of order that Kirishima generates. Kirishima symbolically represents the ‘desirable (*nozomashii*)’ being in the society, and the existence of Kirishima functions as a magnetic field of the exertion of power. Kirishima’s charismatic influence gives students around him a sense of

⁴ Harvey argues that social changes in the era of late capitalism have proceeded hand in hand with ‘time-space compression’ and ‘annihilation of space through time’ that have caused people to experience time and space in a different manner. The advent of change in the meaning of time and space has caused people to think, feel, and act differently (Harvey 1990a=1999). ‘Time-space compression’ has impacted politico-economic actions, and cultural and social life.

reassurance, in a situation where students find it difficult to regard their own future prospects positively. The absence of Kirishima makes students lose their temporal existential reassurance and leaves them perplexed in various senses. The students' search for Kirishima at the end of the movie means that they are chasing a sense of hope at the same time.

The title of this movie should be 'You wipe away my burning tears' if the movie is interpreted from Hiroki's perspective. The actual title, *The Kirishima Thing* (*Kirishima-bukatsu-yamerutteyo*; Kirishima seems to have quit from the volleyball club), implies that the events are seen from the perspectives of the girls and the members of the volleyball club. There is no clear explanation as to why Hiroki suddenly bursts into tears at the end of the movie. Hiroki was looking for answers to the meaning of being 'heated' in *Bukatsu* in the age of postmodernity in Japanese late capitalism. Hiroki thought that Ryoya might have an answer. That is why Hiroki was nervous in that scene in the original novel version. However, Hiroki realises that even Ryoya, the unfamiliar person in the other group, is not sure about the answer either, and Ryoya himself is already resigned about the future regarding becoming a professional movie director. Hiroki later calls Kirishima, who seems to have the answer, but Kirishima does not pick up the phone. The answer to the meaning of being 'heated' is not clarified at all in the movie scene.

IV. Conclusion

This paper analysed the movie *The Kirishima Thing* by regarding Hiroki as the main character among the multiple students featured in the movie and investigated one form of exertion of power in the age of postmodernity in Japanese late capitalism. First, the textual analysis revealed that students in the movie are forcefully generating a sense of hope by getting 'heated' with *Bukatsu*. It is increasingly difficult for Japanese younger generations to grasp something solid that reassures them in their existential anxieties regarding their unpredictable future. Kirishima is a charismatic figure in the school and embodies what the society considers to be 'desirable'. Kirishima is thus a magnetic field of the exertion of power. Many students find existential reassurance by being with him. Kirishima and Hiroki seem to have faced limitations in engaging in *Bukatsu*. In particular, Hiroki looks for the meaning of getting 'heated' with *Bukatsu* and other activities throughout the movie, but he ends up not finding a satisfactory answer. Hiroki's exploration reveals that each student is resigned about his/her future.

Second, this paper showed that the Japanese expressions [...] *katsu* and [...] *ryoku* function as 'the ideology of reheating'. It is true that some 'activities' and 'abilities' endorsed by such slogans serve to maintain the social order, particularly when Japanese younger generations feel it is increasingly difficult to predict their future. However, proliferating usage of such slogans can increase the anxieties of younger generations in the age of Japanese late capitalism if there is no proper understanding of the socio-cultural meanings of those slogans. Such discourse encourages them to have a certain disposition, though the 'activities' and 'abilities' described in such slogans only explain certain aspects of human traits. When the source of power is diffused and uncertain in the age of postmodernity, acknowledgement and recognition of such social order is the very moment when the power is exerted.

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