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**A Spark Beyond Time and Place:
Ogawa Shinsuke and Asia**

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Abstract: *One of the most important documentary film-makers of the post-war period, Ogawa Shinsuke, had an enormous impact on film-makers across Asia. This paper will unpack some of the paradox-filled processes by which his influence spread across the Asian film-making world through an analysis of interviews, film festival records, and the role of translation during his lifetime (1936–1992).*

Energised by an increasing interest in mentoring young Asian film-makers in his later years, and having created a platform for the exchange of films and ideas through the first documentary film festival in Asia in the late 1980s, Ogawa continued to offer a kind of spiritual orientation to other film-makers in translation even after his death. This paper will examine how this process was not merely a result of Ogawa's own efforts but realised through a series of interwoven yet contradictory social, economic, and interpersonal histories.

Amidst the call for a greater exchange of media within and beyond Japan, the circulation across Asia of Ogawa's cultural capital offers an opportunity to think about the significance of the various 'investments' that form such capital, and poses important issues for considering the conditions under which it can continue to survive.

Keywords: Asia; Sinosphere; Ogawa Shinsuke; Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival; cultural capital; translation; interpretation

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‘Often an era most clearly brands with its seal those who have been least influenced by it, who have been most remote from it, and who therefore have suffered most’. Hannah Arendt (1965: 172)

1. Introduction

It might surprise many people in Japan today to know that Ogawa Shinsuke, the Japanese documentary film director who passed away in 1992, remains an object of deep respect amongst young members of the Chinese film world. The goal of this paper is to consider the influence of Ogawa in China, and the strange series of circumstances, both accidental and inevitable, that led to such notoriety.

2. Ogawa Shinsuke and Asia

Born in 1935, Ogawa’s career can be divided into three distinct periods. During the initial period of film-making, starting with his student movement films, but mainly when he lived in rural Sanrizuka with his crew (1966–1975), he created the *Sanrizuka Series* on the localised, popular protest against the construction of Narita Airport during the height of Japan’s post-war political upheaval. Leading his crew into the village of Magino in Yamagata in 1975, the second period of Ogawa’s experimental film series documented collective agricultural life in a rapidly changing, less politically tumultuous Japan (1975–1986). The third period (1987–1992) was a concerted effort to provide a platform and support for documentary film-making in Asia, somewhat separate from his film-making career. His later years were defined by a close working relationship with young documentary film-makers across Asia and a tireless effort to create the first international documentary film festival in Asia – the Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival (YIDFF). Ogawa passed away in 1992, having realised his dream of a documentary film festival in and for Asia, at the premature age of 55.

Here, we concentrate on why Ogawa focused his energies so fervently on Asia at the end of his life. Nornes (2013) pointed to two factors that begin to answer this question. The first was his participation in international film festivals in Berlin and Hawaii with

Nippon: Furuyashiki Village. There, he not only met important new directors and film critics from Asia such as Hou Hsiao Hsien, Peng Xiaolian, and Peggy Ciao, but also gained a sense of how Asian film-makers and their linguistic contexts were marginalised on the international film festival circuit. The experience also emphasised the need to include documentary films amongst those representing the Asian new wave in the film festival context.

The second factor noted by Nornes is that the time ‘when Ogawa Shinsuke discovered Asia was the same period in which Ogawa Productions had begun its gradual disappearance’ (Nornes, 2013). A number of crew members from Ogawa Pro’s Sanrizuka era had already departed before the decision to move to Yamagata. Many of those who decided to move left amidst ensuing conflicts over the collective lifestyle and the film-making process. Staff members in their 40s with families and children struggled with the lack of privacy, despite achieving a degree of autonomy in group activities. Amidst the gradual loss of personnel, Ogawa sensed the need to begin forming a new group – hence, the idea to create films in a way that engaged young artists more directly across Asia began to take shape.¹

As a result of these two shifts in Ogawa’s life and circle of film-makers, he ‘threw himself into creating a new network of allies in filmmaking throughout Asia’ (Nornes, 2013).

Ogawa’s efforts to establish close personal relationships with film-makers across Asia in the years before his death not only defined the final stage of his career in film, but also left an indelible mark on the history of documentary film in Asia. Directors he met during this period included Kim Tong-Won and Byun Youngjoo of the Republic of Korea (henceforth, Korea), Nick Deocampo and Kidlat Tahimik of the Philippines, Teddy Co of Malaysia, Wu Yii-feng of Taiwan, and Peng Xiaolian and Wu Wenguang of China. Many encountered Ogawa in the early stages of their careers, opening their eyes at a formative moment to the potential of documentary film and gradually placing Ogawa in a leadership position in the independent film-making world across Asia.

¹ In 1988, Ogawa held a number of workshops in Nagoya, Japan as introductions for young crew members in his production group (Nornes, 2013).

Ogawa had a discerning eye for young film-making talent in Asia. Many of the directors he met had just premiered their first works and were far from their eventual critical acclaim and international audience. His pinpoint accuracy in finding latent film-making talent meant that he did not just meet anyone. However, the way he went about meeting these young directors was anything but ordinary, leaving an equally important impression and impact on the lives and works of these burgeoning film-makers.

While participating in an Ogawa retrospective in Taiwan in 2014, Wu Yii-feng spoke in detail about his initial encounter with Ogawa.² Although Wu's first feature length documentary film, *Moon Children*, met with critical acclaim, his efforts to continue in documentary film-making were stunted by the paucity of role models or precedents in China. Unable to meet Ogawa, who lived in rural Japan to which he could not afford to travel, he was eventually invited as a guest to a film festival in Takahata, Yamagata, but Ogawa did not appear. Not having a particularly strong inclination to see Ogawa in the first place, Wu was both baffled and angry at having been made to travel, then wait for the meeting to which he had been personally invited. He eventually met Ogawa after leaving Takahata on invitation to the Ogawa Pro studios in Ogikubo. At their first meeting, Ogawa appeared extremely austere, verbose, and intense. Wu's initial sense that Ogawa was a secret, power-hungry figure was later dispelled, however, and he was charmed by his presence.

One of the last pieces of footage before his death, an extended conversation between Ogawa and Wu, communicates the profundity of Ogawa's close relationship with so many Asian directors. Ogawa speaks in a high voice, his words firing off one after another like bullets:

‘When I go to work on my next project, I want to have some young staff to come my place, if there are any in Taiwan. So then, I work with these people for two, three years, really intense work too, you know. That’s the best way for them to learn. These people started coming from Korea and those places to come lend a hand. So then for my next project, right, I want to get all these young Asian filmmakers together. Right now my body is, well, you know, but by next year it’ll be better, so...’ (Ogawa, 1992: 11).³

² Conversation with Wu Yii-feng in Beijing, October 2014.

³ The actual footage was screened by Markus Nornes at the Ogawa Shinsuke retrospective at the Taiwan International Documentary Film Festival.

Figure 1: Ogawa Shinsuke (left) meets Wu Yii-feng (centre) and his interpreter (right).



Source: Ogawa Productions.

The interviews capture a rapt Wu Yii-feng hanging on Ogawa's every word in the busy cramped space, as Ogawa fervently explains for the audience of one (two with the interpreter) his philosophy and vision.

Ogawa passed away a mere 50 days after filming. Wu, on the advice of his mentor, began a nationwide film-making workshop in Taiwan called 'Full Shot', aimed at including people from a variety of regions and socio-economic backgrounds in the film-making world. Those who participated and worked in this milieu would come to be known in the history of Taiwanese documentary film as the 'Full Shot School'.⁴

This pattern of individual meetings with young, skilled, and ambitious film-makers in Asia, organised through trusted friends, continued throughout the latter years of Ogawa's life.⁵ With little knowledge of Ogawa, these young directors came to understand the significance of meeting him only through the unbridled enthusiasm of their peers. For

⁴ At the 1999 Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival (YIDFF), a special event highlighted the film movements of both 'Full Shot' and Hara Kazuo's 'Cinema juku'.

⁵ Byun YoungJoo met Ogawa through his coordinator of Korean cinema, Aoki Kensuke, and Wu Wenguang through the Fukuoka Film Festival's Maeda Yuichi.

those who lacked models for successful, innovative documentary film-makers in their own country, in particular, such a meeting with Ogawa – a pioneer across Asia in documentary film – had enormous importance for their ability to continue making films and serve as leaders in their own right across various contexts in Asia. Using invitations to local cultural events as a way of meeting directors proved to be a foolproof method for his peculiar style of introducing himself to and mentoring this new generation of directors.⁶ Without many resources or outside contact in his later years, Ogawa otherwise would have had difficulty establishing his network. Rendered largely immobile from late-stage cancer in his final years, inviting these directors to Japan was Ogawa's only available option. While this was certainly of great use to him, it likely left his initial vision for a vast network of documentary film-makers in Asia unrealised.

With the help of some good fortune, Ogawa's personal enthusiasm, his efforts to meet other Asian directors, and the personal and financial support garnered from outside his immediate circle, combined to serve as an effective spark – lighting the torch of new documentary film in Asia that far exceeded the initial base Ogawa provided.

3. Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival

The effect of Ogawa's individual efforts to establish personal relationships and a broader network of Asian directors was nonetheless limited in scope. What hastened the spread of his influence was an arbitrary and unexpected development in local politics: the Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival.

In 1989, at the height of the economic bubble in Japan, the city of Yamagata celebrated its centenary anniversary. The planned celebrations were suitably excessive in scope – a ski competition, a giant international craft fair, and cooking competitions punctuated an enormous line-up of events. As part of the festivities, Yamagata municipal government decided to vie for the role of host to a new international film festival, aided by the presence of Ogawa in nearby Magino, who was fresh from a competition victory

⁶ Wu first met Ogawa when he was invited to the Fukuoka Film Festival, but along with other directors was able to really speak with him only after going to Yamagata.

at the Berlin International Film Festival. The desire to host a yearly international event of cultural importance caught the attention of the centenary planners, who immediately began discussions with Ogawa. In a rare feat of both scope and timing, they founded and began the YIDFF in a little over a year ('Eiga-sai 100 no shitsumon').

Figure 2: Asia Symposium: Ogawa Shinsuke is seated fifth from the left



Source: Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival.

With Ogawa's advice and mentorship, the YIDFF initially sought documentary film submissions only from within Asia. The first competition saw more than 200 submissions from 36 different countries, but no Asian films were selected, including Japanese works. Sensing a crisis, Ogawa organised an Asia Symposium during the festival with the theme 'Asian film-makers speak'. The guest panellists each outlined the difficulties they faced in making their films, specifically in terms of often tenuous political conditions in their home countries.⁷ Ogawa and fellow leader of the Japanese documentary world, Tsuchimoto Noriaki, offered their mixed honest feelings on what they 'foolishly thought [they] could do 25 years ago' as a response to these presentations (Kurata, 2015: 54).

⁷ The Asia Symposium included film-makers and critics from Japan, the Philippines, Malaysia, Thailand, Taiwan, and Korea. Two Chinese narrative film-makers, Tian Zhuangzhuang and Chen Kaige, were invited but were not permitted to travel as the Tiananmen Square incident only four months earlier had complicated the international situation. Korean director Hong Ki-Seon, who was in the midst of a legal battle over his works, was not able to attend either. Empty seats were left for the missing participants at the symposium's panel table.

From 1965 on, Tsuchimoto had been filming a 17-part series shrouded in darkness on the lives of those affected by Minamata disease. His experience making films critical of the period of rapid economic expansion during that quarter century in Japan left him with a tenuous connection to the state of documentary film-making in other parts of Asia – defined by emerging tensions between entrenched powers and democratising movements on the eve of the Cold War’s end in 1989. It is worth noting here that one of the more ironic and interesting aspects of both his and Ogawa’s involvement in founding the YIDFF, which facilitated these connections, was born directly out of the excesses of the destructive bubble economy.

The discussions during the Asia Symposium largely served as a site for the shared recognition of struggles and aspirations between the different parties gathered from around Asia. At its conclusion, Philippine film-maker Kidlat Tahimik drafted a kind of manifesto, adopted by the symposium participants:

‘We, the community of Asian filmmakers, proclaim the following: to dedicate our energies towards maintaining the network among peoples in Asia in order to share in the struggles, the resolution and the vision...and thus see the production of works from Asia on the future international stage of the Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival’ (*Ajia no eiga sakka ha hatsugen suru*, 1989)

In a commitment to the goals set out in their manifesto, from the second iteration of the festival onwards, a special category was established within the main competition exclusively for works from Asia, most of which would be shown at the festival.⁸ After Ogawa’s death, the top prize in this category was renamed the ‘Ogawa Shinsuke Prize’. Amongst the first recipients of this prize were Wu Wenguang in 1993 for *My Time in the Red Guard*, Byun Youngjoo in 1995 for *The House of Sharing*, and Feng Yan in 2007 for *Bing’ai*, all of whom were participants in the YIDFF from its earliest days. The festival served not only as an opportunity to introduce their works to an international audience, but also as a window into the festival as a showcase of world-class Japanese and global documentary film-making and as a training ground for young film-makers.

⁸ The Asia section underwent several name changes. It was called the ‘Asia Program’ at the second and third festivals, ‘Flowers Blooming Across Asia’ (*Ajia hyakka ryōran*) at the fourth festival, and ‘Making Waves in Asia’ (*Ajia senpa banpa*) at the fifth festival.

The case of Midi Z – an internationally acclaimed director born in Myanmar and trained in Taiwan who participated in the Asia Section of the 2017 competition with *City of Jade* – is of interest. When asked about the contemporary underground film scene there, he highlighted the following issue:

‘In art, there are two elements, style and content. Life in Myanmar is fairly harsh, so there is no lack of content to talk about. For people [there], the biggest issue is forging a style for themselves, and gaining faster and better access to the latest forms of artistic expression from around the world to think about as models. Though this is the Internet age, they are still isolated from information from around the world. In Myanmar, where people have little experience abroad, it is difficult to overcome linguistic barriers’ (Conversation with author, Ebisu Film Festival, February 2019).

Put simply, while there are topics worth discussing and a passion for doing so, few people can engage a global audience, i.e. participate in larger conversations about artistic expression and aesthetics while demonstrating something unique to their localised context in a truly creative fashion. Most of those previously cited directors, while participating in the YIDFF, studied ‘the latest forms of artistic expression from around the world’ that had not reached their countries, and developed their own sense of style referencing these works. This paper will return to the issue of overcoming linguistic barriers to cinematic development.

Also of importance here is the way in which festival attendees not only study the films exhibited and are exposed to new information about film-making, but also return to their own contexts to share what they have learned and support other documentary filmmakers. A good example of this is Wu Wenguang in China, who was one of the few Chinese directors to meet the late Ogawa in person and became a regular participant at the YIDFF throughout the 1990s after first attending in 1991. Wu, who had not previously seen many foreign documentary films, was not only able to access a wealth of foreign films through meeting Ogawa but was also able to take back to China VHS tapes of others obtained through the Ogawa Pro and YIDFF offices while in Japan. Once back in Beijing, Wu started conducting small private film screenings in his apartment for fellow filmmakers, opening up new conversations on the potential of documentary films.

The participation of Wu and the regulars at his apartment film screenings at the 3rd YIDFF was a watershed moment in the history of independent documentary film in

China. There, they were first exposed through Frederick Wiseman's *Zoo* to 'direct cinema', a style of documentary, visual storytelling with no narration, no interviews, and no score. The decisive influence of this documentary practice can be seen in the following year's submission by Zhang Yuan and Duan Jinchuan, *The Square* (1994), a direct-cinematic exploration of the events surrounding the Tiananmen Square incident, which became the first Chinese film to be awarded a prize in international competition at the YIDFF (outside the Asia section).⁹ This led to an overwhelming influx of Chinese direct cinema at Yamagata, which met with no shortage of critical acclaim – including Yang Yanyi's *Old Men* (1999, Asia Section, Honourable Mention); Du Haibing's *Along the Railway* (2001 Asia Section, Special Prize); Sha Qing's *Wellspring* (2003 Asia Section, Ogawa Shinsuke Prize); Wang Bing's *West of the Tracks* (2003 International Competition, Grand Prize); Li Yifan and Yan Yu's *Before the Flood* (2005 International Competition, Grand Prize); Cong Feng's *Doctor Ma's Country Clinic* (2009 Japan Director's Guild Award); and He Yuan's *Apuda* (2011 International Competition, Award for Distinction).

In this way, the YIDFF served as a kind of educational opportunity and informational resource, as well as a platform for screenings and conversations that would not otherwise have taken place. This speaks to the undeniable power of linguistic multiplicity and the way it was shaped by Ogawa. The emphasis placed on linguistic multiplicity at Yamagata stems from Ogawa's careful attention to the participation of Europeans and Americans in the international film competition, demonstrating his own geopolitical awareness. The issue of why Ogawa was forced to use foreign languages such as English in his conversations with fellow Asian film-makers, or why he had to go through various Western nations when receiving information about Asia, was no doubt related to the real difficulty of creating conditions in which communicated with each other or exchanged information in Asian languages directly (Ogawa, 1993).

While speakers of minority languages were present at the YIDFF, the conversations were mediated by many multilingual interpreters and bilingual volunteers.¹⁰ This

⁹ The directors participating at that time were Wu Wenguang, Duan Jinchuan, and Zhang Yuan. For details, see Akiyama (2018).

¹⁰ While perhaps somewhat counter-intuitive, most film festivals ask participants from outside the anglophone world to perform question and answer sessions in English. Since invited guests, participants, and panellists are tasked with the responsibility of guiding a discussion, one's ability to perform in English (or Japanese) often draws a great deal of attention in these kinds of spaces.

extended to the question and answer sessions, meetings, and deep into the night at the local bars after the screenings ended. When English was used, it perhaps allowed for the ‘direct’ interaction of various groups of people. However, when English functions as the only shared language, it is hard to deny that the ultimate direction of what is discussed inevitably most serves the educational, economic, and social benefit of those who can communicate most effectively in English. This stands in contrast to the Asia Symposium, where the passionate, intricate conversations and debates between the Asian film-makers were held in each of their native languages.¹¹

Of equal importance were the simultaneous Japanese and English subtitling and voiceovers made for many of the films screened at the YIDFF.¹² Since the festival included 100–200 films, the cost and time put into producing subtitles was considerable and sometimes close to untenable. However, the function of this international film festival is to provide a platform for the discovery and introduction of Japanese and other Asian films whose stylistic innovations would otherwise be lost – inaccessible to the non-anglophone world.

4. The Power of Translation

Within this context, it is worth considering the power and function of translation. While oral interpretation brings to life conversations amongst those still living, published translations brought the works of the late Ogawa to many more people. The enormity of Ogawa’s influence in China would never have been possible if not for Feng Yan’s translation of an essential collection of Ogawa’s writings, edited by Yamane Sadao, entitled *Harvesting Film: Seeking Bliss in Documentary* (Ogawa 1993).¹³

The translation of this work was also the result of a series of coincidences. In 1993, Feng Yan, still a student at Kyoto University and working for the Asian Press’s Nonaka Akihiro, visited the YIDFF. Until that point, she had been studying agrarian economy,

¹¹ The Asia Symposium ran from 3:00 p.m. to around 9:00 p.m., and the debate of more than 5 hours was accompanied by continuous oral interpretation and discussion in native languages.

¹² This is quite rare for film festivals in Japan. For example, the films shown at the Tokyo International Film Festival never feature English subtitles.

¹³ The Japanese verb used here, ‘*toru*’, means both to ‘film’ and to ‘harvest’ in Japanese.

but after reading the recently published *Harvesting Film*, her fate was decidedly changed. This work was a posthumous anthology of Ogawa's speeches, writings, and so on, edited by compatriot Yamane Sadao. Noticing that its content was inaccessible to even those Chinese film-makers in attendance at Yamagata, Feng spent the next 2 years translating the work for free for a Chinese audience, which would eventually be published in Taiwan (by Yuan-Liou Publishing) as 'Ogawa Shinsuke's World' (*Xiaochuang Shenjie de Shijie*). Though stalled for a while, the publication was eventually facilitated through a member of the Ogawa network, film critic Peggy Ciao, and has on occasion been on the best-seller list in Taiwan.

That being said, Ogawa's influence in China was not a result of the book's publication. Published in Traditional Chinese and printed vertically (reflective largely of differences between mainland China and Taiwan at the time), its readership in China was limited and knowledge of the work passed mostly by word of mouth. What spurred Ogawa's wider influence in mainland China was the 2007 publication of the same work in Mandarin Chinese, this time entitled 'Harvesting Film' (*Shouge Dianying*).

Figure 3: Ogawa Shinsuke's *Harvesting Film* (left) with its Taiwanese (centre) and mainland Chinese (right) translations



Source: Akiyama Tamako.

While some small retrospectives of Ogawa's work had taken place in Beijing and Yunnan, his works had never been sold there as DVDs,¹⁴ so there were few opportunities to view his films.¹⁵ A book that crystallised his views on and experiences with documentary film-making, however, was able to reach a much wider audience in China.

Ogawa's reach can be seen as far into the present as Hu Bo's 2018 *An Elephant Sitting Still*,¹⁶ winner of the grand prize at the prestigious Chinese language Golden Horse Film Festival.¹⁷ The story is set at the Beijing Film Academy, and the protagonist, reminiscent of Hu, significantly offers the following account of Ogawa's legacy:

'We spent a few days making the poster. Drawn on it is Ogawa Shinsuke and his crew walking over a dry field, based on the cover of some book. There is a line in the book that says: 'Walking in a field once is nothing like walking it 10 times – and we'd been coming here for ten years'. Their mindset really stayed with me after reading that. Pouring out from the breaths of life in the daily shifts and maturation of a field is inexhaustible discovery, it is possible to feel profound joy and surprise in its tranquillity. I hope that by communicating to you all something of Ogawa Shinsuke's mindset, that you believe that 'something can be done' (Hu Qian, 2018: 132).

While never viewing the actual film, the reverberations of Ogawa's cinematic reflections from *Harvesting Film* spread and came to serve for young Chinese filmmakers less as a 'handbook in the art of film-making, but a text of spiritual instruction' (Ishizaka, 2014). Now, as digitisation and increasingly accessible and affordable means of film production change the cinematic ecosystem, many people have taken up independent film-making in the spirit of Ogawa's sense that 'something is possible', regardless of formal training in film-making or whether they hope to make documentaries.

That Ogawa's work was taken to be a kind of 'text of spiritual instructions' in China was due in so small part to Feng's work as a translator. A graduate of the Tianjin Foreign Studies University, well known as a centre for research on Japan, Feng continued on to Kyoto University. Although not blessed with a particular gift for languages or elite

¹⁴ Exhibitions of Ogawa's films in China have included *Yunzhinan Jilu Yingxiang Luntan* (Yunnan Multicultural Visual Festival, 2005), *Beijing Duli Dianyingzhou* (Beijing Independent Film Week, 2008), and *Yisui Dianying + Yingxiangzhan* (Fringe Film Festival Shenzhen, 2011).

¹⁵ For several reasons beyond the scope of this paper, his DVDs were not available for purchase in China until 2016.

¹⁶ Hu Bo's film premiered in 2018 at Filmex, but the director took his own life soon after the completion of the film that year.

¹⁷ As a novelist, Hu Bo used the pen name Hu Qian.

educational pedigree, she pursued her studies with an extraordinary zeal and receptivity for knowledge of ‘the other’. Led to documentary film-making work by Ogawa, Feng remarked that ‘before starting to film, I didn’t understand anything’ (Hagino, 2009), learning as she translated, and that ‘the most important thing I learned while translating Ogawa’s book was to respect your partner’ (Hagino, 2009). In 2007, the same year the new translation was published, her documentary *Bing’ai*, which followed woman farmers displaced by the construction of the Three Gorges Dam over the course of 7 years, won the Ogawa Shinsuke Prize, 14 years after Feng first went to Yamagata.

5. Conclusion

As Ogawa Productions faced serious downsizing towards the end of the director’s life, Ogawa did not turn his attention towards Asia as a means of simply restructuring his own production capacities. As stated in *Harvesting Film*, his experiences between Japan and Asia produced a kind of paradoxical realisation:

‘We took the lead during a time of economic success, though the people from Southeast Asia still have what we lost, which is a good thing, not some kind of arrogance on our part... what we lost, or where we messed up, the emotional complexities we felt at whatever stupid things we’d done, had to keep happening again and again’ (Ogawa, 1993: 40).

Ogawa’s attempt to reach out to Asia was not some kind of light radiating outwards from him over society – but a kind of torch lit in the dark from person to person through the relationships he kindled as he reached out across Asia, sustained by the kind of educational ‘pain’ of his past mistakes. In this way, he built a foundation on which filmmakers across Asia could share in the struggle, the solutions, and the vision of their future.

The story of Ogawa’s influence in Asia is riddled with perhaps even more historical paradoxes than he realised. He reached out in a fervent attempt to enact his vision across Asia precisely when his career and material base were at their most vulnerable. Furthermore, the ‘pain’ felt in trying to reach out to a wider audience is represented perhaps most clearly in the bilingual English and Japanese subtitles on the screens,

expressed in the linguistic multiplicity of the interpreters at his film festivals, born out of the excesses of economic expansion – the origin of all of this pain. After his death, his translated works would come to have a powerful effect on those who had never seen any of his films, which in light of the digitisation of film production, extended far beyond documentary and into the world of independent film-making more generally.

‘It’s a shame that we couldn’t be of more use to people from more countries in Asia...though we didn’t get a lot of investment, there’s so many filmmakers coming around now who really have a future...but if Japan keeps failing like this, and we don’t have the money to even put towards the future, Japanese culture will end up bankrupt’ (Ogawa, 1993: 35–37).

Ogawa’s personal commitment to those Asian film-makers he met, his use of the local cultural event as a way to actualise a burgeoning network of film-makers in Asia, his connections to the local government used to make the YIDFF happen, the mentorship received there by those who participated as translators and interpreters, and the growing pains of film-making in post-war Japan carried by Ogawa, all form essential elements in the formation of the ‘cultural capital’ left by Ogawa Shinsuke, and continue to function as direct and indirect investments in the future of film in Asia.

At the 20th anniversary of Ogawa’s passing in 2012, Peng Xiaolian remarked that ‘Ogawa Shinsuke likely could not have imagined while he was alive the enormous effect that he would come to have in China’ (Peng, 2012). The enormity of his influence was not a product of his work alone – but rather the confluence of often contradictory, individually kindled flames spread around Asia, which, as they gathered, eventually came to burn together, lighting the torch of Asian documentary cinema and its future.

However, cultural capital is not permanent. The YIDFF, the realisation of Ogawa’s dream of a ‘new network of allies in filmmaking spread across Asia’, was forced to become a non-profit organisation in 2006 after losing the sponsorship of Yamagata municipal government (Nornes, 2013).¹⁸ No economic foundation is set in stone, and its future survival is dependent on the support of public, private, and individual contributions

¹⁸ The city of Yamagata became a co-sponsor after this.

within and beyond Japan.¹⁹ The YIDFF is no longer the only documentary film festival in Asia, facing competition from a multitude of festivals around the region.²⁰

The legacy of Ogawa Shinsuke still has enduring cultural capital which continues to draw both film-makers and audiences from around Asia to Yamagata each year – evidenced perhaps most directly when the city of Yamagata was recognised in 2017 as part of the ‘Creative Cities Network’ in the field of cinema. The hope is thus that this study of the many human connections and historical paradoxes left by Ogawa, and his near-miraculous and enduring cultural capital, will serve to strengthen and revive the institutions, goals, and values he fought to realise.

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¹⁹ More and more, programming is sponsored and supported from outside Japan and the festival itself, e.g. the ‘Film Speaks: Light and Dark in Contemporary Taiwanese Documentary Film’ and the ‘Reunion of Japanese and Taiwanese Filmmakers’ were both sponsored by the Taiwan Cultural Ministry, while ‘All About Me?: First Person Documentaries from Japan and Switzerland’ was co-sponsored by the Swiss film festival ‘Visions du Réel’.

²⁰ As of March 2019, documentary film festivals in Asia include the Taiwan International Documentary Film Festival (TIDF), the Korean DMZ International Documentary Film Festival (IDF), the Kerala International Documentary and Short Film Festival in India, and the West Lake Documentary Film Festival in Huangzhou, China. As the number of documentary films around the world continues to grow, the audience for each event is stretched out across the different festivals, although the current estimate for attendance at the YIDFF is around 20,000 people.

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