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Looking Back on My Days as Ri Koran Li Xianglan)

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Otaka Yoshiko was born Yamaguchi Yoshiko in Manchuria in 1920. After joining the Manchurian Film Association in 1938, she starred in films as a Chinese actress under the name of Li Xianglan (Ri Koran in Japanese). Arrested as a spy by the Chinese Nationalists following Japan's surrender, she was arraigned before a war crimes tribunal and acquitted. Following her release, she was active as an actress and singer in Japan and then in the United States. She subsequently served as a television host and journalist covering Vietnam and the Middle East. She served in the upper house of the Diet between 1974 and 1992. This is one in a series of Japanese Lives.

What my father tried to convey to me

Q. In the autobiography *Ri Koran -- My Life* (Yamaguchi Yoshiko with Fujiwara Sakuya), I was particularly struck by your learning Mandarin as a girl, and by the figure of your father, who tutored you. He taught Chinese, and associated with Chinese people as an equal. That point of view differentiated him from most Japanese at the time. It's clear that his approach -- learning the language completely and respecting the culture of the host country -- was passed down to you as his daughter.

Otaka From the time that I was 3 or 4, my father (Yamaguchi Fumio) taught Chinese to employees of Mantetsu (The South Manchurian Railroad). He had been attracted to China in his youth, had gone to Beijing to study, and put immense effort into learning Chinese. When I was in kindergarten, he taught me Chinese pronunciation one-on-one. When I started elementary school, he had me attend the Chinese night class he taught at Mantetsu; I was the only child in a class of adults. I went to a Japanese girls' school until the second grade, then transferred to a Chinese girls' school.

My father had a lot of close friends among Chinese who were sympathetic to the Japanese, and the reason that I have the names "Li Xianglan" and "Pan Shuhua" is that he made a pact as blood brothers with one of his Chinese friends and had me adopted according to Chinese customs. That's the origin of my stage name, Li Xianglan (Ri Koran).

Q. Since your Chinese was so fluent, was it impossible for Chinese to tell that you were Japanese?

Otaka Even in Japanese elementary school, Mandarin was a required subject, and I had always been good at music, so I think that I had a good ear. That must be why my Mandarin pronunciation improved as it did.

Q. Japanese people often put up fences around themselves when they go abroad. But while you had the Japanese name Yamaguchi Yoshiko, in essence you were not Japanese. It seems to me that as someone raised on the Chinese continent you transcended national borders.

Otaka Well, in that era, there was a vigorous anti-Japanese movement and so I tried to avoid being identified as Japanese. I masked the fact that I was a Japanese completely, making sure that I didn't behave in a way that betrayed my Japaneseness.

Appearing in films as Li Xianglan (Ri Koran)

Q. You started working at the Manchurian Film Association as Li Xianglan in 1938, after the Sino-Japanese War had begun, is that right?

Otaka When I was a girl, I had a mild case of tuberculosis, and so I was sickly. The doctor recommended that for my health I should do exercises to regulate my breathing. That's why I began singing, and it was really the first thing that set me on the path to becoming a singer and actress. In Fengtian I was trained by a prominent opera singer named Madame Podresov, and it was when I was playing a minor role in a recital she gave that I was scouted by Fengtian Broadcasting. In 1937 the "Manchurian Film Association" [hereafter Manei] was begun with the joint investment of the Manchukuo government and Mantetsu, and they chose me to star in their movie, *Honeymoon Train* (Mitsugetsu kaisha). [I imagine I was chosen in part because] at the time in China, there weren't any actresses who could sing.

After that, I appeared in a number of movies, and when the movies and songs became big hits, I traveled all over China. After being in three movies for Manei, I was recruited to be in *The Song of the White Orchid* (Hakuran no uta), which was co-produced by Toho and Manei. The movie was advertised widely using the slogans "Goodwill between Japan and Manchuria!" and "Friendship among the Five Ethnic Groups" but for me, what was important was that I was going to be performing with the big star Hasegawa Kazuo, which made me very nervous. I was fortunate enough to perform with Hasegawa in *Chinese Nights* (Shina no yoru) and *The Oath of Hot Sand* (Nessa no chikai).

Q. When you first tried to come to Japan when you were 18, I gather that because you were wearing Chinese clothes, one of the ship's policemen said, "Aren't you ashamed, wearing Chink clothing like that and speaking that Chink language?" and "If you're a subject of the Japanese empire, speak Japanese."

Otaka Yes, it was on the boat between Shimonoseki and Pusan. When he said that, I didn't say, "I'm Japanese." I took those words as if I were Chinese. Having such experiences, I grew to hate Japanese people. What a nasty group of people, I thought, with their blatant feelings of superiority and prejudice against Asian people.

On that visit, I participated in the Exposition for the Founding of Manchukuo (held at the Tokyo Takashimaya Department Store) as a representative of Manei, as an envoy for their Manchurian Japanese actresses. For promotional events at the exposition and at the Nichigeki Theater, I sang wearing a Chinese costume. There, too, I directly experienced the disdainful gaze that was directed at "Chinese."

What was expected of Ri Koran?

Q. At the time, you weren't aware of the content of the movies that you were appearing in, is that right?

Otaka Yes, back then I didn't know much about the content of the movies. In any case, I just gave it my all, thinking it for the purpose of "Goodwill between Japan and Manchuria."

Then, as much as ten years later, in order to write *Ri Koran -- My Life*, my coauthor Fujiwara Sakuya and I saw the three films together. When we were filming, I was so busy that I never saw them from start to finish. I would just film the scenes that I was in, then rush off to the next location. For *Glory and Fame Everafter* (Bansei ryuho) I went to Shanghai, and *My Bush Warbler* (Watashi no uguisu) was in Harbin, so I didn't ever see one of the movies I was in all the way through.

When I saw them for the first time, when we were writing the book, I cried. How could I have starred in such stupid movies! What could I have been thinking, I wondered; I became desperate to the point that I even thought of suicide.

Q. Just to take one example, what did you think of Chinese Nights?

Otaka After the war I was asked in a war crimes tribunal, why I had made Chinese Nights. There's a scene, for example where I get hit by Hasegawa Kazuo. Even though I defended his hitting me as a Japanese-style expression of love, from the Chinese point of view, it was completely unacceptable. At any rate, when after being hit by one of the enemy, [my character] begins to feel affectionate toward him and finally falls in love with him -- that's a Chinese being made a fool of, two, no three, times over.

Q. Perhaps because you were young at the time, you ended up playing roles on screen that were quite difficult for Chinese people to bear. To put it harshly, you were used as a "handmaiden of Japanese imperialism."

Otaka I feel great guilt for having played a Chinese woman useful for Japanese purposes.

Q. However, while this film served as a spearhead for the Japanese invasion, that wasn't all it did. Can't we say -- thinking for example of the fact that so many people fell in love with its title song, Suzhou Serenade -- that it also had a certain brightness that filled the hearts of many people?

Otaka When I met Hattori Yoichi later, he said "I wrote the best song I could for Ri Koran," and I was moved. Even now, when I think back, I feel a mixture of emotions, embarrassment about the movie and fondness for the music.

Thinking about it now, if citizenship had been granted by place of birth, as is the case in America today, as someone born in Manchuria, I could have held Manchurian citizenship, and I think I likely would have gone about things a bit differently. But the rigidity of the situation was such that Japan was my homeland, and I was a Japanese. In addition, Japan and China, two countries that should be the closest of friends, were at war. In the midst of all this, I too simply believed in the slogan of "Goodwill between Japan and Manchuria."

Farewell to Ri Koran

Q. When you visited China again much later, you felt a need to make amends for the Ri Koran of your youth, is that right?

Otaka I hadn't been in Beijing for twenty or so years. I began to feel really uneasy even when we were just flying over Beijing, and when we landed at the airport, I couldn't get off for quite a while. Sun Pinghua of the China-Japan Friendship Association came to meet us. Mr. Sun looked at me with a very severe expression and I felt that he was saying, "We haven't forgotten for a moment what you did during the war, you know."

As one of the scheduled parties during my visit was ending, Mr. Sun said that he had something that he wanted to ask me and that he would come to my room later. A number of Chinese from the association joined us and we stayed up talking until four in the morning. That was the first time I ever had a thorough conversation with Chinese people about the era when I was Ri Koran. Mr. Sun is from the northeast, so he knew all about me from the time that I began working as Ri Koran. He had looked up a good deal, so much so that he seemed to know more than I did.

Talking with them until dawn made me feel a little bit better. I felt that Mr. Sun and I were really able to communicate our feelings to one another. Of course, I don't think that means that I am done making amends, but...

Q. When Japanese [in China] who supported the war effort came to know after the war of the wrongs that had been done, what sort of stance did they take? Did they keep silent about their participation in the war, keeping their past buried forever? Or, although extremely painful, did they reveal their past and look closely at what they had done?

Otaka The year the war ended, I witnessed the killing of a great many people in Shanghai in American air raids. It was a truly miserable experience. FEN news reported on the 10th of August that Japan was about to lose the war, and a good number of people there realized this.

When the war ended, the situation changed completely and the Chinese began going after those who had collaborated with the Japanese under suspicion of being Chinese traitors. Lots of people investigated the Chinese actors and directors that I had worked with. Even if they hadn't made movies with Japanese, just to have made a movie was enough to make one suspect as a traitor.

Around that time, there were numerous press reports saying that a death sentence had been handed down for Ri Koran. Of course there was no basis for this, and because I was Japanese, the crime of Chinese traitor didn't apply to me. But there were reports branding Ri Koran, Kawashima Yoshiko, and Tokyo Rose as three cultural traitors; the hatred toward me was that strong. A number of times the Nationalist government asked about my work during the war, and at first I didn't have any formal documents to prove that I was Japanese, so I had a very hard time. In the end, however, during the war crimes tribunal, my Japanese citizenship was proved, and I was acquitted and ordered to leave the country.

A New Start in the Postwar

Otaka I was planning on taking a boat with evacuees from China back to Japan in February of 1946. Even though I wasn't wearing any make-up and was dressed sloppily, they figured out that I was Ri Koran. I wasn't allowed to board and my return to Japan was delayed. However, I did make it home one month later. At the time, my whole family was in Beijing, and they weren't evacuated until several years later.

As soon I got back to Japan, I received several offers of work. I had vowed, however, that I would never again use the name Ri Koran. I said, "Ri Koran is dead and gone." The next time I appeared in a film was in Yoshimura Kosaburo's *Someday my Life Will Shine* (Waga shogai no kagayakeru hi).

Q. After coming back to Japan, you debuted again as a stage actress, a singer, and an actress. After that you were active in film in America, married the artist Isamu Noguchi, and later divorced. Then you remarried, had the experience of being a full-time diplomatic wife, and in 1967 became the host of *The Three O' Clock You* (Sanji no anata) TV show, reporting on problems in Palestine as well as the Vietnam War. Since then I believe you have continued to work on the Palestinian issue.

Otaka All the Palestinians I met were incredibly proud and refined. I marveled, thinking "these people are so poor and are living in refugee camps and yet..." The children also had a great attitude. I even saw little children in the refugee camps walking around with armfuls of books. I sensed a strong will to study hard.

From the time I was small, I was curious about journalism. *Three O' Clock You* targeted married women and often took up such topics as fashion. That was of no interest to me. The director also realized that it wasn't a good match for me, and so, on August 15th, I went to Vietnam to report on the war. I saw the frontlines in Vietnam, and next I became interested in learning what the Middle East War was all about.

When I arrived in Beirut and got to my hotel, I saw the picture of a beautiful woman on the front page of all the papers. When I asked who she was, I learned that she was a hijacker named Leila Khaled. In other words she had just been caught for hijacking and was being returned in exchange for the passengers of the four hijacked planes. "I'm going to interview this woman," I said, and I went out looking for her. I went to the PFLP (People's Front for the Liberation of Palestine) and met with her.

Q. Do you have a vivid memory of the day that diplomatic relations were restored between Japan and China?

Otake At exactly three, during my program, the news arrived. I mustn't cry, I thought, I can't let the women in the studio see me crying, so I went and hid behind the speakers in the studio and covered my face with a handkerchief. The director, Mori Akio, saw me crying and shot me from behind.

There was a small article in the Sankei Shimbun. While all the stations were showing Zhou Enlai and Tanaka Kakuei shaking hands, Yamaguchi Yoshiko was hosting Three O' Clock You. A camera captured her from behind as she wiped away her tears. Her heart must have been full of all sorts of emotions. That's what it said.

I certainly was happy that day. I even think that very day was the "best day of my life."

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