

*Narrating War in Wartime Manchukuo: A Textual Analysis of Propaganda Films
Screened in Rural Areas of Japanese-Occupied Northeastern China*

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Abstract

This research examines how propaganda films made by the Japanese colonial authorities and screened in rural areas of wartime Manchukuo portrayed the war and daily life. The focus is on Manchurian Films produced by the South Manchuria Railway Company and the Manchuria Film Association. Numerous previous studies in the field of media studies have discussed films screened in urban cinemas, which facilitated the emergence of a colonial urban culture. What has received less attention is the rural context of film screening. Manchurian Films were screened by mobile film projection units active in rural areas. Reflecting the propaganda campaigns in rural areas, the text of the films tends to describe a peaceful and prospering puppet state through portrayal of the daily life of Manchurian people. This research analyzes data from internal publications of the Manchukuo government, PR magazines, as well as video copies of actual films, and argues that Manchurian films fit within Japan's propaganda scheme by targeting Chinese audiences with a narrative of a prosperous Manchukuo as an achievement of the war.

Keywords: Manchurian Films, mobile film projection units, Manchukuo

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Introduction

Japan's Kwantung Army occupied northeastern China and founded the puppet state of Manchukuo in 1932. In order to govern the ethnic minorities of this land, the Japanese authorities tailored their propaganda methods to appeal to the variety of ethnic groups, including through film screening tours in rural areas. Drawing on the propaganda experience of the Manchukuo Concordia Association, films were the most popular and impressive propaganda method directed at illiterate rural people (Okita 1939). The Manchurian Films¹ shown in this propaganda campaign of film projection were produced with the intention of promoting national propaganda, and were presumed by Japanese authorities to disseminate the Manchukuo ideology to communities of multiethnic people who lived far away from urban areas (*Talking About Culture Films in Manchuria*, 1939). Meanwhile, film projection activities were regarded as a tool for both propaganda and entertainment in rural areas of Manchukuo (Otsuka, 1944).

There are two categories of previous studies about Manchurian Films. One focuses on the context of production by clarifying the policies of national propaganda and the institutions of film production such as the Manchurian Film Association and Film Production Unit of the South Manchuria Railway Company (Mantetsu) (Sato, 1985; Yamaguchi, 1989; Hu, 1990; Yamaguchi, 2000; Kato, 2003; Koseki, 2004). The other focuses scrutiny on the film text of particular Manchurian Films (Sato, 1932; Choi, 2005; Liu, 2010; Furuichi, 2010; Ikegawa, 2011; Li, 2014). This previous research neglects the existence of the variety of Manchurian Films screened in rural areas, which were selected by local administrators. Local administrators would negotiate with the Manchuria Film Association to request the production of films containing certain contents, language and titles. However, Wang (2017) points out that the Japanese filmmakers altered the text of Manchurian Films based on audience feedback in rural areas that was collected by Chinese and Japanese projection staffs. Thus, it is necessary to further discuss how the text of these films changed, as well as the chronological characteristics of these texts in different periods.

This paper aims to clarify the characteristics of film texts in different periods of wartime Manchukuo through analysis of actual films that have been released in a VHS-cassette series entitled *Film Testimonies: Documents of Manchuria* (1995) and a DVD series entitled *Documentary Film Series of South Manchuria Railway Company* (2005). Specifically, analysis focuses on *The Capital Surges Forward* (Film Unit of Mantetsu, 1937), *Agricultural Manchuria* (Film Unit of Mantetsu, 1937), *Concordia Youths* (Manchurian Film Association, 1938), *Manchurian Empire: the National Conscription Act* (Manchurian Film Association, 1940), *Lice Are Awful* (Manchurian Film Association, 1943), and *Heroes of Mining* (Manchurian Film Association, 1943). Each of these films can be reasonably connected to propaganda film projection activities based on remaining records, and have been documented by screening

¹ This paper defines Manchurian Films as the films produced by the institutions located in Manchuria, which specifically refers to Film Production Unit of South Manchuria Railway Company and Manchurian Film Association.

organizers as either having been shown or having been intended to be shown. Detailed analysis of scene composition in documentary films that were produced in order to promote governmental policy and ideology is intended to elucidate the reality of propaganda film projection activities in wartime Manchukuo.

This paper proposes the following approach to analyze documentary films that appear in screening tour records, based upon the hypothesis that films depicting daily life in agricultural communities are more appealing and easier to understand for farming audiences. To elucidate farming audiences' reception of a film's content, we will consider whether it elicited the audience's empathy and emotional response. To this end, the paper will focus on methods of "cultural positioning" and "cultural patronage"² that occur in films, with an emphasis on film imagery, in order to analyze how traditional "Manchurian" elements and imported "Japanese" and "modern" elements come to be united. Additionally, we will consider how the films are used to explain previously foreign concepts, as well as how ideological concepts are explained in the absence of imported elements.

1. The foundation of Manchukuo as seen through the Empire's gaze (1932-1937)

The Capital Surges Forward (Film Unit of Mantetsu, 1937)

This film portrays the formation of urban space in the capital Shinkyō and the private life of urban citizens. Except for Japanese subtitles, there are no Japanese elements or Japanese images in the film, and all characters are Manchurian people, including lower-class laborers, as well as wealthy people. In the opening scene, the rising camera focuses on laborers working on a construction site and an unfinished building. Japanese subtitles appear gradually over the background of half-naked laborers.



Fig.1.1



Fig.1.2



Fig.1.3

This Japanese text contains a phrase in the first person, "our capital." Because the capital of Manchukuo is discussed in the first person, the subject that "our (we)" in this Japanese phrase refers to is unclear. This Japanese text exposes the ambiguous

² Perry, Elizabeth., *Anyuan Mining China's Revolutionary Tradition*, 2012, University of California Press, pp. 4-13. Cultural positioning refers to a strategy deployment of a symbolic resources (religion, ritual, rhetoric, dress, drama, art and so on) for the purpose of political persuasion. Cultural patronage means that influential government agencies rewrite cultural records to reconstruct a collective memory and history for strengthening political legitimation.

identity of the storyteller in this silent film. Despite the film's focus on conflict between an entirely Manchurian cast of characters, the first-person phrase in the Japanese language reveals a contradiction that is also present in *Agricultural Manchuria*.

After the lower-class laborers, the film depicts in detail the private life of wealthy Manchurian people living in the capital Shinkyō, such as families living in an upmarket district, girls having a boat trip in a suburban park, and boys playing basketball on a playground.



Fig.1.4



Fig.1.5



Fig.1.6

In the sequences that portray modern life in a developed urban area, all modern or Western elements are represented by Manchurian characters. However, the ending of this film stands out by foregrounding Manchukuo and discretely representing Japan in order to clarify who constructed this environment of modern life.



Fig.1.7



Fig.1.8



Fig.1.9

The racecourse is a device that embodies the slogan of Manchuria, "Gozoku-kyōwa (cooperation among five ethnic groups)". The racecourse functions as a kind of social space where people from each ethnic group gather and form a temporary human relationship (Yamazaki 2010). A Japanese woman dressed in a kimono standing at the front of the crowd is the central subject of the camera. She is the only Japanese character in the film and appears for just ten seconds. This image shows that not only Manchurian people, but also the Japanese in the state capital are fully enjoying the cultural life of "Gozoku-kyōwa," with the national flag making an appearance behind the subtitle "Great Manchurian Empire" on the final screen. This subtitle seems to suggest that all the modern or Western elements depicted in the film have been introduced by "Manchuria" instead of Japan.

Agricultural Manchuria (Film Unit of Mantetsu, 1937)

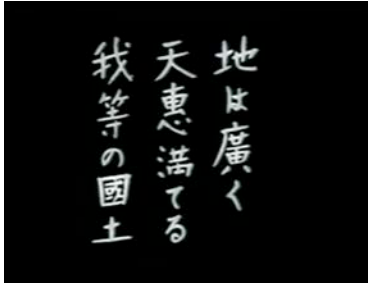


Fig.1.10



Fig.1.11



Fig.1.12

Similar to *The Capital Surges Forward*, a Japanese-language subtitle of "our country's land" appears at the beginning of this film. The entire film depicts no Japanese people or Japanese elements, but rather only the landscape of rural areas of Manchuria and lives of farmers. Subjects include new cultivation methods employing modern machines, the land of the continental plain, farmers' work, and recreation in nature. By this time, the film unit of Mantetsu has already determined a uniform pattern of representation of rural life in Manchuria. This representation of continental agricultural landscapes and farmers is reflected in an ideological slogan that appears as a subtitle in the last scene, similar to *The Capital Surges Forward*.

The question of who the country of Manchukuo, referred to as "ours," belongs is raised but never clarified. In the final text of the film, instead of praising the regime directly, the metaphor of "paradise (rakudo)" and "heaven (ten)" emphasize nature's gifts. However, this subtitle contains a latent abbreviation of Manchukuo's ideological slogan "The Land of Paradise (Oudo Rakudo)."

2. The Vision of a "Peaceful Age" as Narrated by the Manchurian State (1938—1940)

Concordia Youths (Manchurian Film Association, 1938)

In the opening section of this film, Chinese text first introduces the Concordia Association's intentions of establishing a training school for the recruitment of younger schoolboys. Short installments depict life in a training school, which is portrayed as an institution providing a chance for success to middle- to high-class youths.

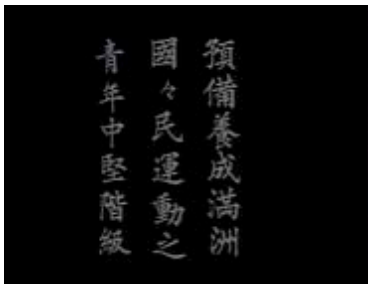


Fig.2.1



Fig.2.2



Fig.2.3

In such installments, the parts containing the producers' primary ideological messages are represented as expressions of national policy thought. The success of these attempts to promote national policy depends on the circumstances in which these images are perceived. This film's important characteristic is the leading role played by the Concordia Youths, a Manchurian element that is directly united with the Japanese elements.

Various scenes allow us to witness how the young Manchurian protagonists are being thoroughly Japaneseized, restrained and controlled by the school's Japanese-style regulations, or how they are actively supporting Japanese rule. For example, in a scene after the Manchurian national flag is raised in a morning ceremony, the boys worship the eastern direction, bowing deeply and politely towards the Emperor residing in Japan. Another scene depicts the boys before a meal saying "Itadakimasu!" as they press their palms together and nod, just as the Japanese do, while another scene captures the boys practicing Japanese kendo during outdoor activities. However, the hoisting of the Manchukuo flag in the morning, as well as playing the two-stringed instrument *erhu* during the break after the meal – the traditional Manchurian elements – are represented as intertwining with the above-mentioned Japanese-style actions, thus showing acceptance and support for Japanese rule.



Fig.2.4



Fig.2.5



Fig.2.6



Fig.2.7



Fig.2.8



Fig.2.9

The film's last subtitled scene displays the following message regarding the establishment of the Concordia Association's training schools: "In the historical process of building the Manchukuo state, we must not divide Japan and Manchuria. It is important to believe in faithfulness and honor, retain harmonious relations with our close Eastern neighbor Japan, and to stick to the principle of minds and hearts united. The Japanese-Manchurian friendship is in the heart of the Concordia Youths." The text makes it clear that the training schools were institutions founded by the

Manchukuo state, and also implies the answer to the question of whose country Manchuria actually is. As a continuation of the South Manchuria Railway Company's early documentary films with their Japanese-language subtitles referring to "our country," the Manchuria Film Association's middle-period productions with Chinese-language subtitles separate Japan and Manchuria and clearly position Japan as the eastern neighbor. But is "our country" that is not "Japan's Manchuria" necessarily the country of its various native peoples? In any case, these films illustrate that Manchuria's future depends on the Japanized youths who carry the responsibility for maintaining Japanese-Manchurian friendship. The cultural films made by the Manchurian Film Association, while gradually reflecting the consciousness of Manchurian independence, also focused on the different minority peoples living in Manchuria.

Manchurian Empire: the National Conscription Act (Manchurian Film Association, 1940)

In this film, all the representations of the Japanese elements are united within images of the "friendly nation" and the Japanese army's fighting strength. In contrast to *Concordia Youths*, there is no deliberate interlinking of the Manchurian elements, represented by the Manchurian protagonists, with the Japanese elements. The idea that Manchukuo is a state for the Manchurian people can be perceived through the contents of Chinese-language narration and subtitles that firmly establish Japan as a "friendly state." This is the result of growing consciousness of Manchurian independence within the films.



Fig.2.10



Fig.2.11



Fig.2.12

Taking lessons from allied Japan's experience, this propaganda film that starts off in the documentary genre employs numerous dramatic sequences based on Manchurian people's lives in order to explain the stipulations of the National Conscription Act. The fact that this Act, enacted by the Japanese colonial ruling class, is interpreted by the Japanese filmmakers through dramatic sequences depicting the daily lives of Chinese people is an indication of the original cultural positioning that occurs in the film.

In the explanatory parts of the *National Conscription Act* film, there are three types of sequences that employ the technique of cultural positioning. First are static and dramatic scenes. These scenes are mainly dramatic representations visualizing the act's conditions of application and recruitment qualifications. The actors shown on the

screen barely talk or move, and are instead merely shown standing as the background for the narration and subtitles used to explain the legal stipulations. These scenes visualize legal information through subtitles that directly provide information to the audience.



Fig.2.13

Fig.2.14

Fig.2.15

The second type of sequence is dramatic interview scenes. Judging from the characters' unnatural way of speaking, these are not genuine interviews, but dramatic reenactments. At the beginning and end of the film's four interviews, a subtitled text of the legal clauses is provided with a short commentary. Four people of different professions are introduced in the interview sequence, all of whom have the qualifications necessary to enter the army. A journalist becomes the narrator and takes interviews in a street setting. The interview technique not only clarifies the unclear sections of the act (such as a requirement to "lead a stable life" in Manchukuo), but also adds human context to the legal discussion, showing ordinary people in their everyday surroundings.



Fig.2.16

Fig.2.17

Fig.2.18

The third type of sequence is a skit scene. There are no text subtitles used during the skits. The purpose of explaining relatively simple clauses in this form might be to better visualize abstract terms as well as to make the film more enjoyable.



Fig.2.19

Fig.2.20

Fig.2.21

The film illustrates how the consciousness of Manchurian independence had grown stronger, and employs a variety of techniques to express difficult legal concepts in a manner that is easy to understand and enjoyable, even for illiterate peasants and lower-class urban audiences.

3. The Image of Assimilation in the Pacific War Period (1941-1945)

Lice Are Awful (Manchurian Film Association, 1943)

Propaganda documentary films produced after 1942 by the Manchuria Film Association reflect an increasing focus on depicting increased production and control of the national spirit (Ishii 1942). *Lice Are Awful* is an educational animated film intended to promote hygiene. The story conveys the necessity of killing the lice that carry a pathogenic bacteria and cause infectious disease among laborers at Fushun Coal Mine. In this film, the lower-class laborers are featured as the main characters. Under the supervision of Japanese doctors, laborers have been transformed into modern, sanitary workers who voluntarily try to understand the significance of the hygiene campaign.

The entire film is composed of dramatic sequences that explain the message solely through the lines of the characters and voice of the animated lice without any Chinese narration. Firstly, it is notable that the Japanese characters are represented as becoming Manchurian.



Fig.3.1

Fig.3.2

Fig.3.3

The first shot centers on a close-up of a Japanese army surgeon's face. He speaks loudly in fluent Chinese as he runs around the town. "Today is a day of cleaning! Typhoid has been spreading in our coal mine, so we must exterminate the lice that carry the bacteria that causes the disease. Everyone, begin cleaning! Everyone, begin

cleaning!” This film differs from other films in which the Japanese characters maintain their independence and distance from Manchurian elements and the Manchurians are the only characters to encounter extraneous elements. In *Lice are Awful*, we see for the first time Japanese characters who can speak Chinese and actively serve the Manchurian people, that is, a representation of Japanese who assimilate to and embrace Manchukuo.

***Heroes of Mining* (Manchurian Film Association, 1943)**

Heroes of Mining is another example that depicts a fusional Japanese character. The entire film is a narrative performed by professional actors. The production was intended to serve as “an image of a model coal mine where Japanese engineers supervise Manchurian laborers with the goal of achieving increased production.”

At the Fushun Coal Mine, Japanese manager Tashiro, who speaks Chinese fluently, supervises laborers from the Republic of China and rural areas of Manchukuo. When a new laborer named Zhang tosses his shovel away and crouches down in refusal, manager Tashiro picks up Zhang’s shovel and continues his work without any words of scolding. Zhang is so moved by his manager’s actions that he is compelled to go return to his work. Afterwards, when Zhang is promoted to be a team leader, he imitates Manager Tashiro and works in front of his entire team to educate the new laborers. In the final scene, Zhang is honored as a model laborer while saying quietly, “This labor gives rise to a county in which all forty millions of us may be happy” (Takahara 1944).

The important features of this film include not only Japanese supervisors who can speak Chinese, but also Chinese narration that links together all sequences and Japanese subtitles that parallel the Chinese narration. One method of imbuing the entire film with a Manchurian appearance is the use of segments that show laborers’ hometowns and recreation in the coal mining town, revealing that the workers from the Republic of China and Manchuria enjoy purely Chinese and Manchurian cultural traditions.



Fig.3.4

Fig.3.5

Fig.3.6

As is shown in Fig. 3.4, Fig. 3.5 and Fig. 3.6, Japanese subtitles explain that the laborers are from the Republic of China and rural areas of Manchukuo, while the scenes show their entertainment is full of activities reflecting Manchuria’s traditional festivals. Manchurian laborers in this film, as in *Lice Are Awful*, are “rescued,

educated and remade” (Liu 2013) by a Japanese military surgeon and supervisors in the coal mine. Rather than the laborers’ culture, the objects of “rescue, education and remaking” are their methods of healthcare and work, which directly correlate to the goal of increasing production at the coal mine.



Fig.3.7

Fig.3.8

Fig.3.9

In the films portrayal, “rescue, education and remaking” depends upon mutual interaction between the Japanese supervisor and Manchurian laborers. Manager Tashiro speaks in Chinese and explains the benefits of work in the coal mine to new laborers: “The work inside the coal mine is tiring at first, and dangerous. But if you follow your instructions, it can be safe and easy to learn. If you become skilled, you can earn more money and be promoted. Think of how you can support your parents and family and do your best.”



Fig.3.10

Fig.3.11

Fig.3.12

In the final sequence, Zhang is awarded a prize for achieving an increase in production. “Japanese supervisors warmly pay attention to our safety and health. Their enthusiasm and kindness reminds us of our parents and helps us to find a way forward.” Zhang’s Chinese narration is meant to speak for all the Manchurian laborers he represents. The establishment of mutual communication between the colonizer and colonized is represented in the Chinese lines and narration of Zhang and the Japanese supervisor, who has proactively assimilated to Manchurian language and society.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the features and evolution of Manchurian Films propaganda movies produced in different periods. Early-period Manchurian Films are defined by the following characteristics: first, the absence of representations of Japan and Japanese people. Representations of Manchuria are primarily divided between agricultural villages and cities. Modern elements are absent from the images of farming villages and agriculture, which depict endless fields sprawling across the plains and rich harvests of agricultural products. Representations of cities and industry portray modern and Western elements such as high-rise architecture, transport systems, and citizens engaging in Western-style living practices. Explanation of these representations of Manchurian elements occurs entirely through narration and text subtitles that extoll the Manchurian state.

Another characteristic of both films for Chinese audiences and for Japanese living in Manchuria is the voicelessness of the people appearing on screen. Indeed, the images of Manchuria in early Manchurian Films representative of the South Manchurian Railways documentaries that are intended to spark audience interest reflect the perspective of the producers from the colonial ruling class. Moreover, the films do not provide a clear answer to the question of whose country Manchuria is.

Middle-period Manchurian films produced after the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War display the following three characteristics. First, middle-period films demonstrate a strengthened consciousness of Manchurian independence from Japan. In *Concordia Youth*, the Chinese-language subtitles create distance between Japan and Manchuria, with Japan clearly positioned as a neighbor to the east. But is “our country” that is not “Japan’s Manchuria” necessarily the country of its various ethnic groups? In *Manchurian Empire: the National Conscription Act*, Chinese-language narration and subtitles make clear that Manchuria is a country for and of Manchurians, while Japan is defined as an ally. This reflects the stronger consciousness of Manchurian independence within the film.

Secondly, the films no longer contain Manchurian characters in the process of becoming Japanese or Western, but instead show Manchurians who retain their traditional appearances and speak for themselves within the films. In *Concordia Youth*, the protagonists are the Manchurian Concordia Youth who are Japanized and unable to speak for themselves. However, in *Manchurian Empire: the National Conscription Act*, the Manchurian elements of local people are intentionally kept from fusing with the Japanese elements. The Chinese-language narration and interviews give voice to the Manchurian characters that appear in the film.

Finally, middle-period films showcase the unique cultural positioning propaganda methods employed by the Manchurian Film Association. Dramatic sequences based on Manchurian daily life are used to explain the clauses of the National Conscription Act in *Manchurian Empire: the National Conscription Act*.

The films produced under conditions of total war after the outbreak of the Pacific War are notable for how the Japanese characters have voluntarily assimilated to Manchuria. Not only can they speak Chinese, the assimilated Japanese who are cast as leaders proactively engage in mutual communication with Manchurians, constructing a certain image of fusion.

The manner in which the Japanese who have assimilated to Manchuria “rescue, educate, and remake” the Manchurian laborers demonstrates that the colonial ruling class proactively sought to construct a new image of Japanese leaders who had “fused with Manchuria” in the films. That image of the “fused” Japanese leader was disseminated through film projection to audiences of Manchurian workers and coal miners, thereby encouraging support for a policy of increasing production in a regime of total war. In short, this image of Japanese leaders’ “fusion” is a manifestation of “cultural patronage.”

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