

Cinematic Nationalism and Melodrama in the Colonial and Postwar Eras

The second half of this volume is concerned with Taiwanese and (South) Korean cinema during the late years of Japanese colonial rule and the first two postwar decades. Films from Taiwan's colonial period were closely associated with the technology brought to the colony by the Japanese. The first touring exhibition in Taiwan can be dated to the turn of the twentieth century, when some traveling Japanese artists (*junggyōshi*) began to hold short-term exhibitions. One of the most famous touring film exhibitors was Takamatsu Toyojirō, a labor movement activist who frequently traveled to Taiwan, beginning in 1903, to exhibit newsreels and short films. In 1907, commissioned by the colonial government, Takamatsu shot *Introducing Taiwan Today*, a documentary about Taiwan that showcased Japan's multifarious modernization projects in the colony.

However, the first film made by a Taiwanese was not produced until 1925, when Liu Xiyang made *Whose Fault Is It?* Unfortunately, the film did not do well at the box office. The Taiwan Cinema Study Association, an organization that had served as the driving force for the film, was disbanded subsequently. Although filmmaking technologies improved in Taiwan after the 1910s, Taiwanese film production did not develop, unlike in colonial Korea. The colonial government regulated access to films, and only a small portion of the population could afford to watch them. Nevertheless, audiences were exposed to a mixture of films from Europe, Hollywood, Japan, and China. Around the 1920s, the practice of touring remained necessary because there were almost no permanent movie theaters in Taiwan except in big cities such as Taipei, Tainan, and

Kaohsiung.¹ The Japanese-run theaters usually screened Japanese and foreign films, with the majority of the audience being Japanese. There were fewer Taiwanese than Japanese filmgoers; the former tended to visit Taiwanese-run theaters for Chinese films or Japanese-language films adopted from Western fiction.

In addition to its multi-sourced, transnational start, it is worth noting that, in colonial Taiwan, both the colonizers and the local Taiwanese elites used film as a tool for social instruction. The Mei-Tai Troupe, established by members of the enlightenment-oriented Taiwan Cultural Association, was an important Taiwanese group that organized touring exhibitions in line with the association's other activities, such as public lectures for the largely illiterate Taiwanese population.

When the Second Sino-Japanese War broke out in 1937, Chinese films were banned, and cinema became more or less a monitoring mechanism and propaganda tool for the colonizers' imperialist ideology. The 1940 film *Tainanshū kokumin dōjō* (Civilian Training Center in Tainan Prefecture) was one such film made to document the training process of becoming a Japanese imperial subject. Based on a close reading of the film, Chapter 6 offers a detailed analysis on how films in early 1940s Taiwan became part of the colonizers' wartime mobilization, used to help ready imperial bodies for sacrifice to the Japanese Empire. In August 1941, under its Information Division, the colonial government established the Taiwan Motion Picture Association (Taiwan eiga kyōkai) to exert greater control over Taiwan's filmmaking, production, and screening. Prior to this, it had already produced or co-produced a few wartime newsreels, such as *March of Taiwan* and "national policy films" (*kokusaku eiga*), such as *Umi no gōzoku* (Pirates of the Sea: The Development History of the South, 1942) and *Sayon no kane* (Sayon's Bell, 1943). The former ends with the wedding of a Japanese

¹Taiwan's first permanent movie theater was Yoshino-tei, established by Takamatsu Toyojirō in 1911. It mainly catered to Japanese audiences. Next to it was Shintaka-kan, originally Yoshino-kan Theater, founded by a Japanese performing artist named Kuniyoshi for Japanese theatrical performances. In the mid-1910s, the two movie theaters competed for audiences and imported films from different Japanese production companies. Yoshino-tei imported films from Nikkatsu Corporation, whereas Shintaka-kan imported films from Tennenshokukatsu Corporation.

samurai and a Taiwanese aboriginal girl to stress Japan–Taiwan goodwill, whereas the latter dramatizes a teenage Atayal maiden’s exemplary patriotism for Japan.²

The public exhibition of motion pictures in colonial Korea began earlier than in Taiwan. By 1906, there were already permanent theaters in Seoul. However, after 1910, the Japanese owned nearly all newly established movie theaters. Koreans began to make their own films in 1919, but by then the Japanese colonizers had already introduced a series of film regulations governing film exhibitions and censorship.³ Similar to the *benzi* practice in Taiwan, there was the *byōnsa* practice in Korea’s silent-film era; after 1918, overall film exhibition, production, and distribution, as well as content, were subject to local and provincial police approval.⁴ In 1925, the National Film Censorship Regulations were implemented, with the first case of censorship cutting short the running time of *Sanch’aewang* (King of the Mountain Bandits).

In addition to exerting control over film content, the Japanese authorities also regulated colonial Korea’s film imports. For instance, in the early 1930s, Governor-General Ugaki Kazushige ensured that Japanese and/or Korean films accounted for a quarter of the films screened in Korea (Yecies 2005). However, the dominance of foreign films came to a halt in 1937, when Governor-General Minami Jirō declared that domestic films had to make up at least fifty percent of the films shown in Korea. Films from the USA suffered greatly because of this decree. By August 1940, under the Korea Film Decree, the production, distribution, and screening of motion pictures in Korea had become heavily regulated. Concurrently, the colonial government began to make propaganda and military films to assist the war effort.

²Lee Daw-ming (2013, 35–41) discusses both national policy films and the overall cinematic representations of Taiwanese aborigines.

³It was generally agreed that the first Korean-made film, more precisely, a kino-drama combining theatrical performance and filmed sequences on one stage, appeared in late 1919 under the regime of Saitō Makoto, the third governor-general of Korea. The film was titled *Ŭirichōk kut’u* (Loyal revenge).

⁴According to Yecies and Shim (2003), a central film police bureau was established in 1922 in Korea’s Kyōnggi Province; administering the *byōnsa* exams was one of its major responsibilities.

To survive, Korea's film industry began to promulgate the politically correct messages expected by the colonial authorities. Some Korean directors also opted to collaborate with Japanese directors. As a result, a fair number of films complying with colonial policies, such as the assimilationist ideology of "Japan and Korea as one united body" (K: *naesŏn ilch'e*, J: *naisen ittai*) and the exclusive use of the Japanese language, were produced in the final years of Japanese rule. Some of those films, for example, the 1941 *Chipŏpnŏn ch'ŏnsa* (J: *Ie naki tenshi*, or Homeless Angels), directed by Ch'oe Ingyu, illustrates well the "enlightenment genre" (see Chapter 8), in which Koreans are portrayed as the other in a "lesser" form, to justify Japan's self-fashioned mission of "enlightening," namely "Japanizing," the colonized. Others employed melodrama, such as the Japanese–Korean co-production *Ai to chikai* (Love and Vow, 1945), or had an action-adventure slant, such as *Bōrō no kesshitai* (Suicide Squad at the Watchtower, 1943). As much as those films were produced for "enlightenment" instead of merely for "entertainment," the colonizers' intended message was not always delivered fully. Their insufficient narrative coherence actually invites alternative readings beyond the monolithic grouping of propaganda films.⁵

Japan's surrender brought great changes to the film culture of both Taiwan and Korea. In Taiwan, the equipment of the Taiwan Film Association went to the succeeding Nationalist government; the association later became the Taiwan Film Production Company, one of three major official film organizations in the early postwar era. Before the 1960s, as in the Japanese period, film production in Taiwan was subject to political and ideological control. Newsreels and propaganda films were prevalent; the KMT banned the import of Chinese films and Hong Kong productions that might potentially be sympathetic with the People's Republic of China. In addition, the KMT regulated the import of Japanese films and even demanded the screening of a national anthem film at theaters, to arouse KMT-leaning nationalist sentiment among Taiwanese audiences.

Crucial to the Nationalist regime's cultural campaign was the anti-communist ideology. The aim was to promote Taiwanese people's patriotism for the Republic of China, as represented by Chiang Kai-shek's

⁵Mizuno Naoki (2012) contends that even though *Suicide Squad at the Watchtower* is a propaganda film, the ethnic hierarchy in it can be potentially challenged.

Nationalist Party, so as to enhance the legitimacy of KMT rule over Taiwan. Under the circumstances, the practice of screening national anthem films was introduced. In these short films, various national symbols were shown and filmgoers were expected to stand up to show their respect for them. This practice may be seen as another wave of “bodily” discipline, in which the object of patriotism was shifted from the Japanese Empire to an idealized (Republic of) China. It is within this context that Chapter 7 should be read.

Generally, Taiwan’s film industry was in a dire state in the 1950s, especially in terms of Mandarin feature films. Émigré directors tended to shoot films in line with anticommunist ideology. It also did not help that Taiwan at that time lacked good directors, scriptwriters, and actors. However, amid these politically correct Mandarin films, Taiwanese-language films emerged after the mid-1950s. Following the success of the romance *Xue Pinggui and Wang Baochuan* in 1955, there was a first upsurge of Taiwanese-language films. This suggests that in the antagonistic cross-strait and global sociopolitical climate, Taiwanese audiences (those from the middle and southern parts as well as less well-educated ones in particular) found solace and emotional resonance in watching such Taiwanese-language films. Between 1955 and 1959, 178 Taiwanese-language films were released, three times more than the number of Mandarin-language films. However, after mass production within a short period of time, the quality of Taiwanese-language films went downhill. By 1960, the number of Taiwanese-language films dropped to twenty-one, although a second wave arrived as soon as 1962 and lasted until about 1980.⁶ Nearly 2000 Taiwanese-language films were produced during these fifteen years, with genres that included tragedies based on the Taiwanese opera repertoire or folklore, musicals, comedies, and mysteries.

By the 1960s, the political situation across the Taiwan Strait became more stable. The government-owned Central Motion Picture Corporation (CMPC) introduced “healthy realism” in 1963, promoting “realist” films that stressed family values and ignored social darkness.

⁶The 1981 film *Chen San Wu Niang* was considered the last Taiwanese-language film. However, the quality of Taiwanese-language films began to go downhill since the late 1960s due to various factors such as the low budget (as they had to be privately funded), hasty mass production, and the disincentives brought by the Nationalist government’s promotion of Mandarin-language films.

Despite the uncritical nature of these films, they helped establish a new style for Taiwanese Mandarin-language films. By 1969, the number of Taiwan-made Mandarin-language films had exceeded that of Taiwanese-language films and become the mainstream in Taiwan's film industry. In addition to the healthy realist films, the melodramatic romance-centric *wenyi* (literally, "letters" and "arts") films, such as those adapted from Qiong Yao's novels, were well received. Hong Kong films, too, were popular in the Taiwan market. The Shaw Brothers' 1963 "yellow plum melody" (*huangmeidiao*) operatic costume film *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai* enjoyed unprecedented box office success. Having lost the Chinese market, several Hong Kong directors took advantage of the incentives offered by the KMT government and came to work in Taiwan. They helped generate a wave of *wuxia* and *gongfu* films in Taiwan in the late 1960s and early 1970s, before the emergence of a series of patriotic propaganda films in the mid-1970s.⁷

The 1945 division of Korea into South and North affected the South Korean film industry in the immediate post-liberation period. Especially on the technological level, the end of the empire brought Korean film production to a halt. The lack of 35 mm film and other equipment impeded film production. Only 16 mm movies could be produced; sound was added post-production or not at all. Between 1945 and 1950, the dominant themes in South Korean cinema were "liberation" from Japanese colonialism and Korean resilience. Movies focused on historical activist figures involved in the anti-Japanese independence movement, especially in the years leading up to 1948, when the ROK was established. Another trend was in the documentary genre, which included newsreels related to the new South Korean nation-building process. Film scholar Yi Yǒngil calls this film genre *kirok* (record) or *munkwa* (culture). He explains that its aim was to showcase the new democratic development and beauty of the nation and to raise public awareness of the communist threat from the North (Yi 2004, 215–24).

The Korean War (1950–1953) also impacted the development of the film industry, but things turned around quickly after the end of the conflict. The South Korean government began to support the film industry in various ways, and movie themes became considerably diversified

⁷This tendency of making patriotic films around the mid-1970s Taiwan could be attributed to various external and internal reasons, such as Taiwan's diplomatic isolation in international stage, and the death of Chiang Kai-shek in 1975.

compared to the late colonial and immediate post-liberation era. This, together with the commercial success of new-generation film directors such as Han Hyōngmo and Kim Kiyōng, ushered in the golden age of Korean cinema (1955–1970). Despite the rejuvenation of the film industry in South Korea soon after the Korean War, films were under government control except the short censorship-free period in 1960–1961. America, through its organizations such as the USIS (United States Information Service) or the nonprofit Asia Foundation, played a significant role in postwar Taiwan and Korea’s ideologically loaded cultural reconstruction, or the (East Asian) cultural Cold War. If modernist literature can be seen as an American cultural import in Taiwan’s early postwar literary establishment, then the USA exerted influence over Korean cinema through promoting a monophonic, America-modeled modernity versus Korea’s postwar destitution on screen.

Although many films from the 1950s and 1960s have not been preserved, it is obvious that the dominant genre was melodrama, particularly in the post-Korean War era. As explained in Chapter 9, Korean melodrama is a hybrid, indigenized form of Western melodrama. Reflecting local social mores rooted in the postwar condition, Korean melodrama also appropriates other genres such as realism, *film noir*, and even fantasy. A diverse, experimental melodrama landscape thus emerged in the postwar years before the Park Chung Hee government imposed authoritarian censorship in the 1960s, again limiting the scope of film production.

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