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**Between Ideology and Spectatorship:  
The “Ethnic Harmony” of the Manchuria Motion Picture Corporation, 1937–1945**

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**Abstract**

Following the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War in 1937, the Manchuria Motion Picture Corporation (Man’ei) was established in Manchukuo. Aiming to be the “Hollywood of the Orient,” Man’ei operated as the only legitimate film corporation in Manchukuo, and its activities included all aspects of local film production, distribution, and exhibition. Studies of Man’ei have tended to describe its activities as part of the colonial project unilaterally implemented by Japanese officials and ideologues. However, the negotiations and contestations involved in the Man’ei project render any simple interpretations impossible, especially within the broader historical and political context of the Japanese empire. This article explores how the theme of “ethnic harmony” (*minzoku kyōwa*) became the core issue for Man’ei and how its attempted filmic expressions ended up uncovering the complexity and predicament involved in the problem of spectatorship. Li Xianglan (Ri Kōran), Manei’s best-received transcolonial movie star at the time, represented the multiple ethnicities of Manchukuo; however, it is less well known that her “mainland romance films” were considered inappropriate for audiences in Manchukuo (Mankei). This article will complicate earlier assumptions and show that the theme of “ethnic harmony” came to be marginalized, while entertainment films presumably acceptable to the Mankei audience came to centrally preoccupy the feature films of Man’ei.

Following the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War in 1937, the Manchuria Motion Picture Corporation (hereafter, Man’ei 満洲映画協会) was established in Manchukuo, the so-called Japanese puppet state in Northeast China (1932–1945). Aiming to be the “Hollywood of the Orient,” Man’ei not only monopolized the production, distribution, and screening of films in Manchukuo but also centralized the entire range of Manchukuo’s film-related activities, such as managing cinema schools, screening films in rural areas, and sponsoring studies of film

technology. Man'ei was considered the only legitimate film company operating within Manchukuo, and during its eight years of existence it produced approximately 100 feature films, 180 documentary films, and hundreds of newsreel items. Why was this large-scale, state-led film corporation established in the midst of a full-scale war? What did it mean to set up a new film studio, particularly in Manchukuo, where it was believed that no indigenous film industry existed and that cinematic illiteracy among local peoples prevailed?

Existing studies have tended to view Man'ei as a peculiar and exceptional part of Japanese film history or to focus on major figures such as Li Xianglan (Ri Kōran) and Amakasu Masahiko (Satō 1995; High 2003; Yamaguchi 1989). Other studies, especially those from the perspective of Chinese film history, have reduced the role of Man'ei to “cultural enslavement” of local peoples by Japanese imperialists (Cheng, Li, and Xing 1963; Hu and Gu 1999). In the last decade, academic interest in Man'ei has grown significantly (Yomota 2001; Stephenson 1999; Ikegawa 2011; Lahusen 2000; Baskett 2005; Yomota and Yan 2010), for two main reasons: the increase in availability of Man'ei film materials since the mid-1990s (Yamaguchi 1994) and the emergence of new historical perspectives that underscore transcoloniality beyond postwar national boundaries in East Asia, a factor that also contributed to the proliferation of studies on Manchukuo within the framework of so-called empire history (*teikokushi*).

Despite the increasing scholarly attention paid to this peculiar cultural institution, however, the complicated relationship between its extensive cultural and ideological layout and the changing Japanese colonial strategies have remained largely unexplored. In order to understand this relationship, it is important to take into account the political form that Manchukuo adopted as Japanese imperialism proceeded: Manchukuo asserted itself not as a colony of Japan but as a new nation-state “allied” with the Japanese empire. To what extent did this new form of alliance (in contrast to the metropole-colony model) come from the need to camouflage the undeniable military campaigns waged in the early conquest of Northeast China since the late 1920s? What were the real effects and consequences of this new gesture, which may have been regarded as different from, and even contradictory to, the existing imperialist strategies in other colonies and acquired territories? Regardless of how nominal and disguised the articulation of Manchukuo as an “independent allied state” was in actuality, what is at stake

here is grasping the empire's changing strategies to better dominate local peoples and territories in the transforming international milieu.

In this article, I take the case of Manchukuo as a prototype of a new, twentieth-century form of imperialism (Duara 2003) as a critical starting point in exploring the politics of media culture in Manchuria. The role of propaganda and ideological war, in this sense, became a crucial site of contestation, especially when nation building and identity formation were under way. Man'ei and its discursive cinematic activities vigorously took part in this process.

I attempt, in particular, to spotlight how the practice of propaganda was adapted and compromised in relation to Man'ei's key ideology of "ethnic harmony," while situating my analysis in the broader historical context of Manchukuo and the Japanese empire. By unraveling how this official ideology came close to bankruptcy and how the resulting reformulation occurred at the level of representation, I intend to provide a window into the predicament and arbitrariness of national subject formations.

### **Films for Total War**

In order to better understand Man'ei as a specific form of propaganda machine, it should be noted that the tendency toward nation-directed film control at this time was by no means limited to Manchukuo. In fact, the years of Man'ei's presence coincided with the high tide of state intervention in film and media in major film-producing countries. On the one hand, this state intervention existed partially to protect national cinema against Hollywood's increasing domination of domestic film markets. On the other hand, and more importantly, this state intervention occurred because film came to be regarded as a highly effective political tool, especially with its ability to make strong appeals to the public for wartime mobilization.

To give a few examples: the Soviet Union sought to nationalize its film industry from its inception; the Nazi government chose to gradually purchase and hold the majority shareholding in Germany's major film companies; France, the United Kingdom, and Italy, in less direct ways, implemented a variety of film policies, ranging from film import control and censorship to national film support. What is clear is that the 1930s saw the rise of political interest in films as one of the most powerful mass media, and this seems to have opened up a new channel for what

George L. Mosse (1975) calls the “aesthetics of politics,” where drama and liturgy would be used to establish symbols, myths, and shared feelings among the masses.<sup>1</sup>

In this sense, the establishment of Man’ei exemplified a globally growing trend toward strong association between the film industry and state policy since World War I. Initially funded by the Manchukuo government and the South Manchuria Railway Company, Man’ei was organized and operated in accordance with the 1937 Manchukuo Film Law, which preceded its counterparts elsewhere, such as the Japan Motion Picture Law (1939) and the Korean Motion Picture Ordinance (1940).

In contrast to Japan and colonial Korea, where the authorities tried to control the existing film industry through regulations and mergers, the newly born Manchukuo rapidly began to establish its film industry from scratch. Man’ei’s activities included not only film production, distribution, and exhibition but also the training of film experts and actors and the promotion of research on film technology. This can be regarded as the prototype for wartime film control by the state or as an attempt to create the cinematic “new order” then being pursued by the Japanese central government and filmmakers. Although discussions of the reorganization of the film industry began in earnest in Japan in the mid-1930s, at a time when the industry was producing an average of five hundred films per year, the actual rationalization process took place in Manchukuo. Indeed, Man’ei was born at a time when no indigenous film industry existed to coordinate the various interests involved; it also benefited from its status as a latecomer in that it was able to immediately utilize advanced technologies. Man’ei, therefore, was a kind of radically rationalized and highly bureaucratized form of state-led film industry based on wartime economic controls.

### **Toward “National Romanticism”**

The extraordinary efforts Manchukuo put into this ideological apparatus should, in fact, be explained in terms of its constant emphasis on political legitimacy since the state’s foundation in 1932. Manchukuo was in many ways a propaganda state that sought legitimate recognition of its existence—both domestically and internationally—precisely because it had been the product of the unilateral military actions of the Kwantung Army. Furthermore, in the midst of the Sino-

Japanese War that erupted a mere five years after its foundation, Manchukuo was forced to further hasten its efforts to prepare itself for total war. In this context, the significance of propaganda came to be widely appreciated, as the home front and domestic mobilization were regarded as crucial to the war effort.

One interesting aspect of the official discourse on the issue of propaganda and education in Manchukuo, just as in other existing nation-states, then, is the considerable emphasis placed upon people's participation as active subjects in modern mass politics. The government officials and journalists in Manchukuo proposed that, in modern societies, coercive measures alone were no longer sufficient to implement national policies effectively; instead, they felt it was now crucial to persuade the people themselves to take responsibility for the implementation of these policies. Horiuchi Kazuo, chief of the Public Information Section (*hongbaochu* 弘報処) in Manchukuo, tried to link the notion of "social education" to that of propaganda, claiming that it was desirable to make the latter closer to, and ultimately convergent with, the former.<sup>2</sup> In other words, the most effective all-out mobilization was expected to be achieved only when the people understood, consented to, and thus voluntarily supported national policies.

Furthermore, the specific, fundamental task faced by the Manchukuo officials was how to transform their people, with their complex ethnic composition—Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Manchu, Russian, and Mongol—into a nation (*kokumin*). Education director Tamura Toshio of Manchukuo's Department of Public Welfare (*minshengbu* 民生部) made clear that the cornerstone of Manchukuo propaganda should be "national romanticism" (*kokuminteki romanichishizumu*) or "national mythology" (*kokuminteki shinwa*) (Tamura 1938). He pointed out that Manchukuo lacked the conditions, such as history, tradition, and legend, through which its people could presumably be united as one nation. Clearly, he was immensely conscious of the multiethnic composition of Manchukuo's *kokumin*, which potentially contained tensions due to its different cultures and sentiments. Thus, propaganda for him meant more than just the usual concrete slogans for the purpose of urgent mobilization; it was a vehicle that was expected to nurture and shape shared feelings and emotions beyond logic in the long run.

Indeed, it is possible to see that, for Tamura, the project of nation building was a more arduous task than building up a state's bureaucratic and physical infrastructures. Despite the

catchphrases commonly used at the time, which reveal the developmentalist nature of the Manchukuo state—catchphrases such as *kensetsu* (construction) or *kenkoku* (literally, “state building”)—it was probably difficult for Tamura to utilize these phrases for the project of national subject formation as well as for developing the concept of “Manchukuoans,” since he was acutely aware that the identity formation process would require more than corporeal and material mobilization.

Therefore, the investment in the film industry as a national policy can ironically be attributed to the inferior domestic conditions for effective propaganda. It seems that, for government officials like Tamura, the most cutting-edge technology was essential to galvanize the “semifeudal” and “illiterate” people of Manchukuo. Insofar as the propaganda personnel were concerned about how to mold people’s minds, the intensive audiovisual effects of film were expected to perform an instrumental role in spreading the spirit of Manchukuo.

### “Ethnic Harmony” as Pan-Asian Universalism

What, then, constitutes *the* authentic Manchurian culture? What memories of the past and inherent cultural values were available as the raw materials for Man’ei films? One important thing to keep in mind when considering the issue of Manchurian culture (*Manshū bunka* 滿洲文化) is that we should carefully avoid the danger of simply contrasting this “fake” case of Manchukuo with other cases of “genuine” nation-states—those that remain as independent nation-states today, such as Japan, Korea, and China. That is to say, we should not overlook the fact that every specific national culture that is attributed to its nation-state is itself an arbitrary and ideological product. Any so-called national culture is necessarily eclectic and selective in essence, and therefore we cannot postulate an inevitable correspondence between a particular culture and a nation-state. What happens, rather, is a series of processes and practices in which certain cultural elements are chosen, sorted, interpreted, and then forged into a national culture, while others are discarded or oppressed.<sup>3</sup> The only unique factor in the case of Manchukuo is that, due to its violent and abrupt process of state building, the very arbitrariness and artificiality of constituting a “national culture” appears all the more conspicuous to both the local people of Manchukuo and the international community.

The problem faced by the Manchukuo government and Man'ei was that they lacked cultural sources that could appropriately be used to “invent traditions.” As in the case of other nation-states, government officials and scholars in Manchukuo initially paid attention to the legacies and memories of the past. Yet they were at a loss as to how to manipulate the past and historical events in politically innocuous and productive ways. Due to the multiethnic composition of the Manchuokuoan peoples, it was clearly difficult to construct a “Manchurian culture”—in the sense of a national culture of Manchukuo and Manchukuoans—based on the history of any particular ethnic group or dynasty.

This dilemma is clear in the special precautions taken by the Kwantung Army and Manchukuo government officials to curb the interpretation that Manchukuo was somehow a reestablishment of the Qing Dynasty (清朝復辟). They saw that propping up Puyi as the symbolic head of the new Manchukuo state could potentially engender such a dangerous “misconception.” In the meantime, it was also impractical for them to pick cultures that could allude to a direct association to mainland China, because Manchukuo was, since its inception, a new state born with the declaration of “independence” from the Chinese nationalist regime. In addition, adopting Japanese culture was not an option, since they were eager to erase the shameful label of military occupation and, ultimately, the view of Manchukuo as a “puppet state” of imperialist Japan.

A compelling alternative put forth by some colonial officials was a form of cultural heterogeneity based upon ethnic diversity and the discontinuous nature of Manchuria's culture. Matsuura Kasaburō, a historian of Oriental studies at Xinjing's (Shinkyō) National Foundation University (Kenkoku Daigaku 建国大学), introduced two key influences on Manchurian culture after briefly summarizing the historical fluctuations of Han Chinese and Tungus in Manchuria. First, he claimed that there was a lack of cultural continuity caused by frequent changes in sovereign powers. Second, there was a lack of any “essence” in Manchuria due to the intermittent implants of “Chinese culture” that had historically transferred over the Shanhai Pass. Consequently, he argued that the culture that would flourish in Manchukuo should be neither “Sino” nor “Japanese” flavored, but something completely different—something created by the various ethnic groups residing in Manchuria (Matsuura 1941). That is to say, the very condition



of ethnic diversity and subsequent prospects for ethnic harmony were deemed central to Manchurian culture.

Not surprisingly, Man'ei's staff attempted to define the characteristic of its films in a similar vein—that is, in terms of the theme of ethnic harmony. Comments such as “Ethnic harmony film should constitute truly Manchurian films” frequently appeared in Man'ei's official popular magazine, and the theme was officially promoted as a designated motif for public story contests. The film academy of Man'ei planned to recruit more actors from ethnic minorities so that it could make “authentic” Manchurian films. Above all, apart from its connection to the official ideology, the issue of ethnic harmony was in fact a practical concern for the Man'ei staff. The issue came repeatedly to the foreground in the actual process of film production, in which actors, most of whom were Mankei (literally “Manchurian,” but also including Han Chinese and Mongolians), and directors, most of whom were Nikkei (literally “Japanese,” but also including other Japanese imperial subjects such as Koreans), had to cooperate beyond cultural and linguistic differences. In a sense, all Man'ei films were coproductions between at least the Mankei and Nikkei staff.<sup>4</sup> Besides, the call for ethnic harmony films was more often than not based on the observation that the target audience in Manchuria would consist of various ethnic groups. In other words, the perceived diversity of audiences themselves was regarded as a significant determinant of the themes or content of films, rather than the other way around.

This is evident in Japanese critic Satō Tomonobu's observations of watching the Japanese-language version of a newly released Man'ei film, *Iron Blood, Wise Mind* (*Tiexue huixin*, 铁血慧心, 1939), in a Japanese theater in Xinjing. He remembered noticing that the Nikkei audience laughed and clapped at the same scenes as the Mankei audience had during another screening in a Chinese theater. From this he concluded that even though different ethnic groups reacted similarly to tropes such as humor and satire, Man'ei must pay close attention to how these feelings could be expressed differently according to different ethnic traditions and habits. He thus put forth a direction toward which Manchurian films should advance: Man'ei films must produce a certain delight that can attract ethnically diverse audiences. According to Satō, this feature had regrettably not been adequately developed by Japanese filmmakers, since Japanese films were too “Japanese” in their nature and consequently too parochial to be properly

understood and enjoyed by foreigners (Satō 1940). Here, we glimpse a universalism inherent in his observation that seeks to move beyond simple indoctrination through “Japanese films.”

This tendency toward a sort of universalism was, in fact, underpinned by two related yet distinct orientations in the broader cultural and political discourse in the metropole. First, criticism was emerging against the existing film culture in Japan during the last half of the 1930s. More specifically, a group of filmmakers, critics, government officials, and social activists started to call for renovation of the film production system that had long rested upon profit-seeking principles and bald corporate interests.<sup>5</sup> One of the leading film critics within this faction, Tsumura Hideo, more famously known as a discussant at the roundtable discussion of the “Overcoming Modernity” symposium, offered the most scathing attack on this phenomenon. According to Tsumura, “Japanese film companies were born and raised out of show business and usury capital, and this situation had shaped Japanese film culture for the last forty years” (Tsumura 1943).<sup>6</sup> For him, there seemed to be no choice but to shift his focus in the last ten years of his career from film criticism to issues of film policy because of the qualitative degeneration of Japanese cinema, a decay that he argued was rooted in the industry’s capitalist mode of film production and the blind competition that existed among film production companies.

Needless to say, such a call for reform prefigured the ensuing legal and political control of films by the state, such as the Japan Motion Picture Law of 1939. For many of the Japanese Man’ei staff, at least at the level of institutional and social function, Man’ei was anticipated to represent an antithesis of the “Americanized” Japanese film culture that was so overtly focused on maximizing profits while neglecting the social and pedagogical function of film.<sup>7</sup>

The second aspect of the above-mentioned universalistic tendency is an orientation toward what we now call Asianism or Pan-Asianism, or what was at the time called East Asiatic universalism (*Tōa-teki fuhensei* 東亜の普遍性), as a cinematic theme. Mizugae Ryōichi, a Nikkei director who joined Man’ei in 1939, speaks of his aspiration as a new member as follows:

I wish to create Manchurian films, which can neither be filmed in the United States, nor in Japan. I do not want to follow Shanghai films, either. Costumes and expressions need not be Westernized at all. Looking up at the Great Wall and the slow stream of Songhua River, I see a three-thousand-year history rising from its grave. (1939, 60)

Here Mizugae calls for the creation of a unique category of Manchurian film based on the lives of Asian peoples, distinct from Western films as well as westernized Japanese and Shanghai films. He argues that as long as Man'ei films meet the needs of various ethnic groups domestically, this universal appeal to the Asian peoples could be extended to Japan, mainland China, and even to the United States.

This universalistic stance is distinct from the more metropole-centered approach to Asianism often found in Pan-Asianist discourse on cinema in the metropole. For instance, Tsumura Hideo's concern about how to overcome Americanism and its mechanical culture led him to call for a return to Japanese culture. He even insisted that Japanese films should in the long run replace Hollywood films in Southeast Asia. By contrast, Man'ei staff felt that this emphasis on Japanese culture through Japanese films must not be directly applied to Manchurian culture. Man'ei's version of East Asiatic universalism aimed to create something distinctively East Asiatic (*Tōateki* 東亜的), a universalism toward which Japanese films must at least be renewed, or upgraded.

In this way, within the discourse on the character of Manchurian films, the problem of ethnic harmony was defined in terms of an East Asiatic universality based on multiethnicity. Therefore, at least in principle, the theme of "ethnic harmony" represented a key motif in the discourse of Manchurian films. In what ways and to what extent it could be represented, however, was another complicated task.

### **Li Xianglan: A Blessing or a Dilemma?**

One of the most successful projects that sought to embody the theme of "ethnic harmony" in Man'ei films was the creation of Pan-Asian movie star Li Xianglan (Ri Kōran 李香蘭; originally named Yamaguchi Yoshiko). Li made her debut in an early Man'ei film, *Honeymoon Express* (*Mie yue kuai che*, 蜜月快車, 1938), and in the following years she became one of the most popular transcolonial movie stars after appearing in what later came to be known as *The Continental Trilogy*, a series of films coproduced by the major Japanese film companies.

In those films, Li often portrayed a typical Chinese woman who falls in love with a

Japanese man; she was thus believed by many to be a Japanese-speaking Chinese actor. However, her Japanese origin was by no means a secret even at the time. Rather, as an actor she maintained an ambiguous dual identity as both Japanese and Manchukuoan (or Chinese). This ambivalence is revealed in Manchurian local readers' queries and complaints about her enigmatic identity in Man'ei's official magazine, *Film Magazine* (*Dianying huabao* 電影畫報).<sup>8</sup>

Li represented the Pan-Asian imaginary rather than a fixed singular ethnic figure in Tokyo and Shanghai (Stephenson 1999; Washiya 2001). Notwithstanding some confusion they might have caused, her shifting ethnic identity and transnational presence in Asia were applauded by critics and audiences in Manchukuo. Indeed, her multicultural characteristics and her ability to appeal to audiences across Asia appeared to fit perfectly with the ideal of Manchukuo, which officially declared itself a multiethnic nation.

Dressed alternately in Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Mongolian, and Russian traditional costumes on the pictorial pages in *Manchuria Films*, under the heading "Ethnic Harmony: Changes of Li Xianglan," Li visually portrays the theme of "ethnic harmony" by embodying various ethnic identities through cross-dressing (figure 1). This poster recalls the famous wall painting by Okada Saburōsuke, one of the leading artists of Western painting in Japan, that hangs in the lobby of the main government office building in Xinjing. In this painting, five girls from different ethnicities joyfully hold one another by the hand, symbolizing harmony among the five ethnicities in Manchukuo (figure 2).<sup>9</sup> The persona of Li Xianglan successfully incarnated precisely this ethnic diversity through her ability to present herself as a cinematic figure with various ethnic origins.

Notwithstanding the powerful symbolic effect of her persona, it should be noted that the way in which Li was perceived in Manchukuo differed significantly from how she was perceived by Japanese audiences. The screening of *China Nights* (*Shina no yoru*, 支那の夜, 1940), her most successful movie in Japan, was banned within Manchukuo by the censorship authorities. They feared that the initial anti-Japanese sentiment held by the female protagonist could provoke "undesirable" responses from Man'ei audiences (Ikemizu 1941). If we consider that the same film was eventually screened in mainland China, this reveals the extreme caution taken by the Manchukuo authorities. Beneath this overt anxiety over possible anti-Japanese sentiment,



Figure 1. "Ethnic Harmony: Changes of Li Xianglan." Source: *Manshū eiga* (April 1940).



Figure 2. "Ethnic Harmony." Source: Manshū Kokushi Hensan Kankōkai (*Manshukoku shi* 1971).

there probably existed a broader concern about the dynamics of Mankei spectators' reaction: How would the Mankei audience see the film's depiction of themselves and their relations with their Japanese counterparts? To what extent would this narrative of harmony and friendship be acceptable to Mankei spectators? Or, to put it differently, would this acceptability backfire and provoke "undesired" anti-Japanese sentiments or, even worse, aid audiences in identifying with Chinese nationalism?

Not surprisingly, some Mankei audiences (especially male intellectuals) expressed discontent with the films that starred Li Xianglan as a Japanese-speaking Chinese girl. For instance, Mankei scenario writer Beigu pointedly accused these Japan-Manchukuo cooperative films of "pursuing market interests by infatuating the Japanese audience with a Chinese girl who is always more beautiful and smarter than a Japanese girl" (1942, 23). He further argued that "the essence of the continent can never be a girl who can speak Japanese" (Bei 1942, 23). These local intellectuals likely felt uneasy about a typically gendered representation of the Japanese-Chinese relationship, especially with the latter being willingly dominated.

Man'ei finally transformed Li Xianglan's persona from a girl who falls in love with a Japanese guy. She played a modest rural girl in *Yellow River* (*Huang he* 黄河, 1942), an indigenous girl from Gaoshan in Taiwan in *Sayon's Bell* (*Sayon no kane* サヨンの鐘, 1943), and a singing Russian girl in *My Nightingale* (*Watashi no uguisu* 私の鶯, 1943) (An 2004; Makino 2001). None of these characters came close to portraying the type of romantic partner Li played in *The Continental Trilogy*.

### **"Produce Films for Mankei!"—Vanishing "Ethnic Harmony"**

The problem regarding Mankei spectatorship can be tracked more explicitly by looking at a predicament aroused by Man'ei's early ambitions for "ethnic harmony through film." As stated above, Man'ei's new Nikkei directors and scriptwriters did not intend to directly import "Japaneseness" into Man'ei's films. During Man'ei's first few years, these Japanese artists and producers eagerly sought to explore what would visually constitute something Manchurian. For instance, the Nikkei scenario writer Nakamura Yoshiyuki resolved that he would discover the "secrets" of local peoples' emotions and lives by delving deeper into their languages and cultures

(1939, 61). Literary critic Hasegawa Shun, on the other hand, argued that the peculiar characteristics of beauty represented by women from each ethnic group could successfully enrich the themes of Manchurian films (1940, 110).

The underlying assumption held by these Nikkei artists was that there were certain inherent cultures and emotions, presumably in each ethnic group, and that, as directors, their goal should be to vividly record these qualities on film. Just as the ideology of “ethnic harmony” was primarily based on the assumption of the ontological existence of each ethnic group, Japanese filmmakers were convinced that some intrinsic culture and values for each ethnicity existed naturally as sources for recording and discovery through the camera lens. This also explains why so many of Man’ei’s documentary films (*bunka eiga* 文化映画) consistently centered on the lives of ethnic minorities, such as white Russians, Mongols, and the Manchus living within Manchukuo.<sup>10</sup>

In fact, this anthropological and ethnographic attitude aligned closely with the Manchukuo government’s policy on ethnic minorities. Generally speaking, its strategy can be described as “isolation and concentration.” For example, members of the Oroqen, a hunting tribe that lived in the forests in the mountainous areas in northern Manchuria, were forced to concentrate in isolation in the eastern and western Xing’an provinces, where they were forbidden from practicing agriculture and from intermarrying.<sup>11</sup> All these restrictions were imposed under the banner of “preserving their original culture” (Duara 2003, 180–182). One of the most common techniques adopted by documentary filmmakers was ethnographic description of each ethnic minority group. Man’ei gradually increased the production of these ethnic films in order to preserve the distinct cultures and ways of life of these minorities before they eventually became assimilated.

However, this practice of the “ethnographic gaze” adopted by Nikkei staff members provoked unease in some Mankei audience members when the object of the gaze was the Mankei people themselves. This tendency is clearly demonstrated in a series of roundtable discussions that were held in major cities in Manchuria by Man’ei’s official magazine, *Manchurian Film*, for the purpose of discussing the Mankei response to Man’ei films. A group of Mankei artists and journalists who joined a discussion in Fengtian in 1938 unanimously revealed their discomfort

with the exoticism in Man'ei films. A scriptwriter criticized Japanese filmmakers' taste for the bizarre in the scenes of boisterous temples and festivals in *Ten Thousand Miles in Search of Mother* (*Wan li xun mu* 万里尋母, 1938), while a journalist claimed that local people were sick of seeing such landscapes. Also, most of the participants agreed that Man'ei films should feature Manchukuo's newly modernized and advanced aspects, instead of showing old-fashioned customs such as foot binding (*chanzu*) or queue-style hair (*bianfa*) (Zadankai 1939).

These reactions indicate that Mankei intellectuals were keenly aware of Japanese producers' desire to find something rare or different from themselves. Mankei intellectuals strongly rejected this Japanese ethnographic gaze. The Nikkei staff in Man'ei had to keep in mind that Mankei people themselves, not the Nikkei or Japanese in the metropole, made up the majority of its film audience. In films destined for consumption in Japan, they might have been able to depict a "primitive culture" with some exotic flavor. But it must have been awkward and uncomfortable for local audiences to see images that illustrated their lives and landscapes from an outsider's perspective—that is to say, through the ethnographic gaze of those who ruled.

Consequently, in the later years of Man'ei, great effort was put into eliminating elements that suggested such an ethnographic gaze and might therefore arouse discontent among Mankei audiences. Man'ei staff took into consideration criticism against films adapted or translated from Japanese originals and those that presented an awkward mixture of Japanese and Chinese customs.<sup>12</sup> In addition, along with the establishment of the Entertainment Film Department (*Yumin yinhuabu* 娛民映畫部) during the institutional reform in early 1942, the number of Mankei scenario writers and directors drastically increased in anticipation of attracting more Mankei audiences. In 1941, when Man'ei produced 30 of its 108 total feature films, 26 screenplays were written by Mankei writers and directors. Man'ei focused more on comedies and melodramas than ever before, in an effort to make its films more similar to those from Shanghai, which were overwhelmingly popular among Mankei audiences.<sup>13</sup> Mankei critic Fu Zhuo discussed this tendency in Man'ei feature film, pointing out a radical change of focus "from education to pure pleasure" in 1941 (1943, 56).

In the course of moving toward the motto "Films for the Mankei People!" the discrepancy between the principle of "ethnic harmony" and the actual practice of film production



gradually widened. In feature films that targeted the domestic Mankei audience (and potentially the mainland Chinese audience), any implications of ethnic interactions and gestures of friendship, especially between Mankei and Nikkei, were deliberately ruled out. Apart from three initial feature films and a series of coproduced films starring Li Xianglan, it is surprisingly hard to catch a glimpse of the theme of ethnic harmony in most Man'ei feature films.<sup>14</sup> In this way, the coexistence of ethnically different populations within Manchukuo was carefully concealed in the images and narratives of Man'ei feature films, especially the entertainment films.<sup>15</sup>

### **Reverberation: Minority Voices for “Harmony of Five Ethnicities”**

“Ethnic harmony” as a national ideal of Manchukuo was often proclaimed in the form of the “harmony of five ethnicities” (*gozoku kyōwa* 五族協和), which referred to Japanese, Han Chinese, Korean, Manchu, and Mongol. In actuality, however, the ideal was often reduced to the binary relationship between the Nikkei and Mankei, or in contemporary terms, the Japanese and Chinese. In other words, although the official taxonomy of ethnicity in Manchukuo regarded the “Nikkei” as including the Japanese and Koreans, and the “Mankei” as including the Han Chinese, Manchus, and Mongols, more often than not this inherently arbitrary classification left out minorities such as Koreans, Manchus, and Mongols.

In the case of Man'ei, by the same token, “ethnic harmony” was primarily a problem between the Nikkei and Mankei. Nikkei staff members, positioning themselves as the agents of harmony, had to consistently be aware of the Mankei audience, the majority of Manchukuo's population. The Mankei staff and intellectuals, who were keenly aware of the asymmetrical relationship between Mankei and Nikkei, envisioned the Mankei audience in the center of all of Man'ei's activities. For both groups, however, the principle of “ethnic harmony among five ethnicities” could be put aside, at least for the time being, in order to make national propaganda more attractive to the vast majority of Manchukuo's population.

Before such a resolution was reached, however, there was a time when minority voices were heard, albeit faintly. In a special section entitled “The Problem of Ethnicity in Man'ei Films” in *Manshū eiga* in 1939, contributors from various ethnic groups expressed competing views on the issue. Mankei contributor Sun Pengfei unhesitatingly maintained that it was still too early to

produce films that contained elements of ethnic harmony due to the fact that the majority of the Manchukuo population was Mankei. Russian and Korean contributors strongly argued against this view, ironically, by appropriating and holding on to the official ideology of ethnic harmony. Russian contributor M. Vlasov opposed the idea that Man'ei should only focus on one ethnic group, that is to say, Mankei (1939, 26). Likewise, Korean journalist Yi T<sub>ae</sub>-u harshly attacked Man'ei for ignoring “ethnic harmony” and merely seeking to meet the “vulgar taste” of the Mankei audience. Furthermore, Yi even proposed creating separate production sections for each ethnicity, an arrangement he called “separation for integration” (1939, 24). It was the ethnic minorities, like Vlasov and Yi, who acutely sensed that filming the grand slogan of ethnic harmony was going amiss. They perceived the discrepancy between what they expected to see and what they actually saw.

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### *Notes*

1. Even though Mosse did not directly mention films in this context, he still offers valuable insights into the “new politics” of modern mass society, in which the masses come to acquire the means to participate as political agents through cultural activities. Richard Taylor more directly points out the phenomenon in which the political system consistently seeks to intervene in the individual’s life by means of propaganda (especially films) and calls it “highly politicized” society (1998, 3–6). For the details of film policies in each country, see Ricci (2008), Welch (2002), Kenez (1985), and Reeves (1999). For the case in Japan, see Katō (2003).
2. Horiuchi also pointed out that Manchukuo, like Japan, was not alone in redefining propaganda in relation to a broader sense of social education, mentioning the official title of the office in charge of public information in Germany: “Reichsministerium für Volksaufklärung und Propaganda” (Reich Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda) (1938:5-6).
3. Naoki Sakai explains this process as “reducing incommensurability of ‘cultural difference’ to ‘specific difference,’” thereby making “two particularities as specific difference” into “properties of the two different communities” (2005:5-7).
4. In later years Mankei directors emerged. “Nikkei” and “Mankei” (or “Manjin”) were the terms officially used in Manchukuo. They literally mean “of Japanese descent” and “of Manchu descent,” respectively, but the former usually included other colonial subjects, such as Koreans, and the latter generally referred to the majority Han Chinese, but included other ethnic minorities such as Mongols and Manchus. On the ambiguity of the terms, see

- Tamanoi (2000). I use these terms along with the English translations “Japanese” and “Chinese,” not only because they successfully indicate the historicity of the categories in the context of the 1930s, but also because they reveal the arbitrariness and nonessentialist character of the category of nationality or ethnicity. At the time, the term “Mankei” was designed by the Manchukuo authorities to differentiate the Chinese people in Manchukuo from those in mainland China, even though the majority of these Mankei people came from mainland China as migrant workers and farmers from the late nineteenth century onwards. Manchukuo’s official media, like *Manshū eiga*, always used the term “Manzhouren” (pronounced “Manshūjin” in Japanese) or “Manren” (“Manjin” in Japanese), instead of “Shinajin,” to refer to those of Chinese descent in Manchuria. In the postwar literature, of course, these terms were simply replaced by “Chinese” (Chūgokujin), which makes it difficult to elucidate the complicated and contested process of national subject formation.
5. On the issue of capitalism and film, see Cazdyn (2002).
  6. Even though Tsumura’s argument seems filled with strong totalitarian overlays, he was not alone in demanding a reform in the existing film production mechanism, in which qualitatively superior and diverse works were defeated and replaced with populist and inferior works due to the overheated competition for box office profits among the film companies. With its yearly production of more than five hundred films, Japan was one of the largest film-producing countries at the time.
  7. Admittedly, it is difficult to determine to what extent these Japanese staff agreed with Man’ei’s official policy and whether they were actually critical of Hollywood films. This complexity is further aggravated when one observes the ideological and political diversity of Man’ei’s staff members, with people occupying extreme positions on the spectrum: from those with obvious statist propensities—such as Amakasu Masahiko, the head of Man’ei—to those of *tenkō* (converted 転向) Marxists such as Ōtsuka Yūshō. However, it would be inappropriate as well to regard Man’ei as a mere copy of “original” Japanese film companies, or the ideological “enslaving apparatus” of Japanese imperialism. Work remains to be done on the relationship between Man’ei and members of its staff who were former Marxists filmmakers and critics—particularly those who were members of the Proletarian Film League of Japan (Prokino)—and their activities in and after Man’ei.
  8. Interestingly, the editorial staff of the magazine further intensified this ambiguity rather than clearing up the question: “Li says she’s Japanese when in Manchuria and Manchukuoan when in Japan. However, when she was asked if she was a Korean when in the peninsula, she answered no” (Henshūbu 1941). Elsewhere in the magazine, they also offered different answers.
  9. Sections of this large-scale wall painting—the central part of the image of the girls and the right part of the peasant and fisherman—were later featured on special postage stamps commemorating the tenth anniversary of Manchukuo in 1942. See Naitō (2006). Note the different composition and arrangement of each ethnicity in the wall painting and in “Ethnic Harmony: Changes of Li Xianglan.” The painting, which was physically located in the center of Manchukuo politics, has the Japanese girl in the center, while the pictorial page in *Manshū eiga* focuses more on “Mankei,” with the bigger figure. In the world of films in Manchukuo, the central position of Nikkei gave way to Mankei.
  10. These documentaries included the *Manchuria Ethnography Trilogy* (*Kazakku no heiwakei*:

*sanka* カザツクの平和境・三河); *Manshū no kirisutokyōson: shōhachikashi* 満洲の基督教村・小八家子; and *Bokutō Orasai* ボクトー・オラ祭), which was filmed between 1939 and 1940. In addition, the films on the Mongols include *Hulunbei'er* (ホロンバイル), *Rama shūtan kesseishiki* (喇嘛宗團結成式), *Mōko no kanki* (蒙古の歡喜), *Higashi Mōko fūbutsu hen* (東蒙古風物篇), *Higashi Mōko ramabyō hen* (東蒙古喇嘛廟篇), *Rakudo shinmōko* (樂土新蒙古), and *Mōko ryōki* (蒙古獵騎); films about the White Russians were *Hyōjō senrei sai* (氷上洗禮祭), *Romanovka mura* (ロマノフカ村), and *Hokuman no Hakkei Rojin* (北滿の白系露人).

11. By the 1930s, many Oroqen had already come to engage in agriculture, as the process of Sinicization was underway (see Duara 2003, 182). This clearly shows Manchukuo's official strategy of preventing racial integration in order to divide ethnic groups into separate bodies. Interestingly, this strategy contrasts strikingly with the assimilation policy Japan extended to other territories and other peoples, such as the Ainu, Okinawans, Koreans, and Taiwanese. In terms of socio-economic policy towards ethnic minorities, however, the cases of the Ainu and Oroqen show a strong commonality. The two ethnic groups were forced to abandon their newly acquired means of livelihood (agriculture, in the case of the Oroqen) and return to what were supposedly "traditional" ways of life. For more detailed analysis on the Ainu, see Morris-Suzuki (2000).
12. Some Mankei critics and audience pointed out that many of the Man'ei film titles were so odd that it was hard for them to figure out what they meant. For instance, one theater manager from Harbin suggested that a better Mandarin title for *Mi yue kuai che* (蜜月快車) would have been *Xin hun kuai che* (新婚快車) (Zadankai 1938). It seems that *mitsugetsu* 蜜月, the Japanese translation of "honeymoon," was not commonly used in Mandarin Chinese at the time.
13. On Man'ei's new focus on entertainment films and Mankei personnel, especially after the appointment of Amakasu Masahiko as head of Man'ei, see Kang (2007).
14. The three feature films are *Liming shuguang* (黎明曙光, 1940), *Dong you ji* (東遊記, 1939) and *Xiandai Riben* (現代日本, 1940). According to the synopses of the films, the first is about a Nikkei policeman who dies performing his borderline duties, while the latter two adopt a similar storyline about Mankei protagonists from rural areas traveling to Tokyo and other cities in Japan. The films starring Li Xianglan can be categorized into two types: those for which Man'ei simply sent Li to other Japanese or Shanghai film companies for coproduction, such as *Byakuran no uta* (白蘭の歌) with Tōhō and *Wan shi liu fang* (萬世流芳) with Zhonglian; and those in which Man'ei actively participated in coproduction, such as *Ying chun hua* (迎春花) and *Watashi no uguisu* (私の鶯). The rest of the more than one hundred feature films, however, mostly featured the themes of romance, home drama, Beijing opera, ancient costume dramas (*guzhuang* 古裝), and comedies exclusively starring Mankei actors without demonstrating any interethnic contact.
15. Ironically, however, as part of the effort to spread its influence across East Asia, Man'ei began to position itself as the center of "Rising Asia" (*Kōa* 興亜) films and sought to grasp the leadership of imperial film policy in mainland China by actively intervening in the

reorganization of the local film industry, with the cooperation of the imperial army units dispatched to Beijing and Shanghai. Man'ei's attempts to play the leading role in forging a coalition among the three largest film organizations on the Mainland reached their peak with the organizational meetings of the Mainland Film Confederation and the coproduction of *Wan shi liu fang* (萬世流芳).

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