



Introduction to Transcolonial Film Coproductions in the Japanese Empire: Antinomies in the Colonial Archive

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For decades following Korea's liberation from Japanese colonial rule, scholars and film critics avoided or largely ignored the study of Japanese-Korean film coproductions. In large part due to the difficulty of placing such films comfortably within the linear narrative of national history and the story of a presumed national subject, Korean scholars and critics in the immediate postwar and postcolonial decades tended to discount and disregard films produced during much of the colonial period, especially the wartime years. The film critic Yi Yǒng-il, for example, charged that *Korean* filmmaking ended in 1942, thereby making any films produced thereafter unworthy of attention. In his words, the severe controls placed upon Korean film production extinguished "the breath of life of Korean cinema in its proper sense" (Yi Yǒng-il 1986, 333).

At the same time, in post-defeat and decolonizing Japan few who had been involved in these coproductions, let alone postwar scholars and critics, expressed an interest in reflecting back on so-called "war collaboration films." Instead, the collapse of the Japanese empire and the national refusal of responsibilities for the violence of Japanese colonial rule, which was enabled by new imperatives of the Cold War, encouraged a forgetting, disavowal, and even literal hiding or destruction of colonial cultural productions. We know, for instance, that in the immediate postwar years the filmmaker Imai Tadashi, who directed two of the films discussed in this special issue, attempted to hide his involvement in the making of *Love and the Vow* (*Ai to chikai*),¹ even though he later wrote at some length about his participation in colonial coproductions (Imai 1986).

Thus the limited availability of films produced under Japanese rule until the last decade or so should be considered as much a symptom of the postcolonial and transnational politics of memory and forgetfulness as a significant cause for the dearth of scholarship and lack of general reflection on colonial film coproductions. In short, the considerable flurry of scholarly and popular attention to rediscovered films in recent years—while testament to the enormous efforts of researchers and other staff at the Korean Film Archive (KOFA) who have recuperated and made available roughly a dozen films from the colonial period—cannot be attributed solely to the physical “repatriation” (as one symposium held at the KOFA has put it) of such films.² Instead, the articles in this special issue reflect a new and vibrant transnational milieu in which cultural productions under Japanese colonial rule are increasingly scrutinized from perspectives that exceed and often question uncomplicated narratives of national development, stagnation, or oppression, as well as the binary of collaboration versus resistance. Such works call our attention to the antinomies of modernity under Japanese colonial rule, including the often unexpected continuities between colonialism and nationalism, as well as other postcolonial legacies of the colonial era.³

To be sure, the articles offered here are critically aware of the restrictive and violent means by which the Japanese colonial regime controlled and censored film and cultural production. The Korean Motion Picture Ordinance of 1940, which was closely modeled on the metropole’s Motion Picture Law of the previous year, greatly enhanced the powers of the colonial state over films made in the colony. The legal measures made it possible to later amalgamate all ten previously existing film companies into the Korean Motion Picture Production Corporation and to control film distribution through the Korean Film Distribution Company. Concrete cases of direct censorship or self-censorship are likewise identifiable and are examined in several of the articles in this issue. Such conditions for cultural work under colonialism make it clear that no legitimate analysis of colonial film should take lightly the asymmetries of power under which supposed “coproductions” were produced and distributed.

Nevertheless, the contributions here show that censorship, regulation, and control had productive as well as repressive effects. To be sure, the regime of colonial censorship (both formal and informal) suppressed or precluded content, leaving gaping, awkward, and irretrievable silences in the films. Yet it also produced an archive of multiple texts and unleashed a plethora of mixed messages and contradictions that do not fit easily into conventional

frameworks of analysis, such as those that seek to identify only collaboration or resistance.⁴ For example, in his contribution to this volume Jaekil Seo has identified and analyzed no less than five extant texts or scripts for the film *Volunteer* (K., *Chiwŏnbyŏng*, J., *Shiganhei*). He raises fascinating questions about how the various modifications might have left different impressions upon their audiences and then concludes with the evocative statement that “Korean and Japanese viewers of *Volunteer* may have consumed very different films.” In his article Naoki Mizuno likewise subtly analyzes different textual and film versions of *Suicide Squad at the Watchtower* (*Bōrō no kesshitai*) to demonstrate both the repressive effects of censorship and the possibility that messages subverting the colonial ethnic hierarchy might still have been communicated. A further point to consider, as Naoki Watanabe suggests in his contribution, is that filmmaking is an inherently collaborative enterprise in which mixed messages are possible and in which it is often difficult to identify the source or intention of individual agents in the production process.

Furthermore, in our view the “resistance” versus “collaboration” binary unwittingly reproduces the very logic of the Japanese empire itself, which sought to manage cultural production and to measure degrees of loyalty by asking these very same questions. We fear that even some recent work on newly available coproductions seems overly committed to the project of simply unveiling subversive resistance to Japanese rule beneath the surface of apparent cooperation. In going beyond this binary logic, each of the articles in this issue calls our attention to dissonance, contradictions, fissures, incompleteness, differential texts and readings of the same film, and what Nayoung Aimee Kwon in her article refers to as the “multiple, schizoid, and self-conscious” perspectives of those involved in filmmaking. The end result is a series of observations, based upon many close readings that enhance our understanding of colonialism by grappling with the complexities, including the antinomies, of the colonial cultural archives.

Many of the contradictions, as our contributors show, derive from two ultimately incommensurable demands of colonialism that intensified in the wartime period. On the one hand, Japanese colonial rule, especially during wartime, sought the cooperation of Koreans and hence their inclusion within an expanding concept of Japan. It also sought to constitute Koreans as subjects, in the sense of active agents whose conduct could be guided toward the desired ends of colonial rule. On the other hand, such an inclusionary and assimilationist trajectory that also included massive efforts to constitute Koreans as imperial subjects during the war period threatened to blur the boundary between the colonizers and the colonized. This led in many

officially sanctioned cultural productions, including films, to often subtle, yet clearly discernible, strategies to reaccentuate colonial difference—a demand that often produced an almost pornographic fascination with the colonial exotic, or what was then regarded as quaint “local color.” The articles by Kwon, Seo, and Watanabe emphasize this tendency in films depicting the formal colony of Korea, while Sookyeong Hong explores this theme for Manchukuo, which took the form of an independent nation-state despite the reality of Japanese domination. Such contradictions produced anxieties among the colonized and the colonizers alike, as well as imperfect suturings that gave most of the films a jumpy, clumsy, or in some cases even artless quality.

This special issue brings new perspectives to these colonial films by readings of primarily Japanese-Korean coproductions. At the same time, we have included one study (by Hong) specifically on the films of the Manchuria Motion Pictures Corporation (Man’ei). Other papers (by Mizuno and Watanabe) further extend their analyses to consider connections with Manchuria. Through a study of Man’ei films as well as coproductions with complex trajectories across Japan, Korea, and Manchuria, these authors collectively help put into relief both the continuities and discontinuities between Japanese cultural rule over its formal colony of Korea, on the one hand, and the nominal nation-state of Manchukuo, on the other. Here we see differences and yet an uncannily similar imperial logic under which contemporaneous continental films were being produced. Building upon recent work on Manchukuo, which has begun to take seriously that this political unit was established in the form of a nation-state rather than a colony, such as Korea or Taiwan (Duara 2003; Han 2004), Hong’s article, for example, charts the antinomies of Japanese-Manchurian coproductions. In some regards, such as the common disavowal of racial or ethnic discrimination and the production of a kind of East Asian regionalism and universalism, the Japanese empire worked in similar ways in both its formal colonies and nominally independent allies within the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere. Yet there were critical differences and contradictions specific to the case of Manchukuo—for instance, in the explicit ideology of ethnic harmony and the obvious but still underanalyzed imperative to constitute national subjects of Manchukuo, rather than Japan.

In closing this introduction we need to address a few ironies of our attempt to analyze antinomies, dissonance, fissures, silences, and the concept of coproduction itself. First, following Chonghwa Chung’s provocative thesis in his contribution to this volume that there was never an

original moment of Korean filmmaking that was purely Korean—that is, when Korean filmmakers worked completely independent of the Japanese filmmaking industry—then we are compelled to acknowledge that because of the asymmetries of power under colonial rule all films produced in Korea were in some sense coproductions produced under unequal relations, even before the tightening of controls during the total war period. Put differently, for better and for worse, Korean national cinema during the colonial period did not have an unadulterated existence outside the colonial relation and was born within the context of the two cinematic empires of Japan and Hollywood. This is not to say that Korean filmmaking was simply derivative or subordinated, but to recognize that Korean filmmakers always faced the enormous challenge of realizing their artistic creativity even as they confronted the demands imposed upon them by the need to negotiate and work with Japanese filmmakers, technology, and capital.

Moreover, when we consider the case of coproductions in Manchukuo, which was formally an independent nation-state, we are urged to reflect that films produced anywhere are always already asymmetrical coproductions of one sort or another. This is because filmmakers must always answer to the imperatives posed by governments, the film industry, and globalized film conventions—most notably those that emerged originally out of Hollywood. Yet we take this more fluid conception of coproduction as a fresh opportunity to extend our analyses of films made in the Japanese colonial empire beyond the specificity of this period and location. The angle taken by Hong for Manchukuo, for instance, suggests that rather than regard Manchukuo as a fraudulent nation-state, we may need to admit that nation-states can exist only through fraudulence.

Second, we would be the first to admit that a definitive recuperation of the meanings embedded in the colonial film archive is an impossibility, even if we would limit such a project to the relatively small proportion of extant films made during the era. Indeed, there are and should continue to be multiple and contradictory readings of these films and their significances. This does not mean, of course, that all rereadings are relative and equally valid; nevertheless, we accept that the various positions of writers and differential political stakes will necessarily produce multiple interpretations. The truth will be measured, we believe, not through a positivist method and comparison of facts alone; but through the meaningfulness of the questions we ask of the imperial archive in the present, the rigor of empirical research, the quality of our methods at a conceptual and theoretical level, and the degree of responsibility with which we engage with

the antinomies of colonialism, racism, nationalism, modernity, gender, and other matters that continue to be relevant.

Finally, this special issue, which interrogates the limits of transcolonial coproductions in various ways, is itself a product of ongoing transnational collaboration among scholars variously embedded in and in between the unequal geopolitical locations of Korea, Japan, and North America. Beginning with a series of panels formed at the Society for Cinema and Media Studies conference in Los Angeles (2010) and the Association for Asian Studies meeting in Hawaii (2011), the project was a result of collaborative thinking among some of the contributors in this volume and several others whose papers unfortunately could not be included. The volume as it evolved in different directions through these encounters has been informed by the conference contributions and writings of the other members, especially Hie-Yoon Kim and Yi Hwa-jin.

We have been fortunate to have several contributors join us from an international conference held in Kyoto, Japan in 2012 (Chung, Mizuno, and Watanabe), and the conversation continued at a workshop sponsored by *Cross-Currents* in Berkeley. Thus, this collaboration involved multiple and variously configured encounters over the course of several years, with different members participating at various stages of collective thinking. While there inevitably exist structural inequalities based on linguistic, national, institutional, gendered hierarchies, each of us acknowledges that the collection as a whole has developed in productive directions through these multiple exchanges. Thus this introduction, as well as each article in this issue, is less the product of one individual or the coeditors alone, but of multiple crisscrossings. The differences, contradictions, and dissonances that remain are symptoms of a still ongoing and open dialogue to which we hope still more and varied readings and voices will be added through the interactive e-journal forum and beyond.

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Notes

1. In romanizing Korean, Japanese, and Chinese, the articles in this special issue follow the McCune-Reischauer and modified Hepburn (as used in Kenkyūsha's dictionaries) and the

- Pinyin system. Exceptions have been made for proper nouns for which there are standard renderings in English (for example, Tokyo, Seoul), as well as when individuals have indicated that they prefer other romanizations.
2. In 2004, the Korea Film Archive (KOFA) found *Military Train* (Sō Kwang-je, 1938), *Fisherman's Fire* (An Ch'öl-yong, 1939), *Volunteer* (An Sō-gyōng, 1941), and *Homeless Angels* (Ch'oe In-gyu, 1941) in the Chinese Film Archives. A year later, in 2005, the KOFA discovered *Labyrinth Dream* (Yang Chu-nam, 1936), *Spring in the Korean Peninsula* (Yi Pyōng-il, 1941), and *Straits of Korea* (Pak Ki-ch'ae, 1943) in the same archive. Before that, there were only three narrative films available from the colonial era: *Figure of Youth* (Toyoda Shirō, 1943), *Suicide Squad at the Watchtower* (Imai Tadashi, 1943), and *Love and the Vow* (Ch'oe In-gyu, 1945), which were discovered in 1989 in Japan's Tōhō archives. In 2006, several documentary films, including some from the office of the Governor-General of Korea, were discovered in the Gosfilmofond Archive in Russia. In 2006, *Dear Soldier* (dir. Pang Han-jun, 1944) was found in the Chinese Film Archive. In 2007, the silent film *Crossroads of Youth* (An Chong-hwa, 1934) was found in a private collection in Korea. In 2009, parts of *You and I* (Hō Yōng/Hinatsu Eitarō, 1941) were discovered in the National Film Archives of Japan (see Chung 2009).
 3. For early and influential works on colonial modernity in Korea, see Kim and Chōng 1997; Shin and Robinson 1999; Yun 2003; and Miyajima 2004. For an example of an important intervention into colonial continuities in Japan, see Iwasaki et al. 2005. Certainly we would like to acknowledge the emerging scholarship that is helping to nuance our understandings of coproductions. See, for example, Yi Hwa-jin 2005; Kim Ryō-sil 2006; Yi Yōng-jae 2008; Han'guk Yōngsang Charyowōn (KOFA) 2009; and Fujitani 2011.
 4. For a fine work on censorship in the Japanese metropole that takes a Derridean-inspired method on the productivity of censorship, see Abel 2012. An emerging corpus of scholarship on censorship in colonial Korea includes, for example, Tongguk Taehakkyo Munhwa Haksurwōn Han'guk Munhak Yōn'guso 2010.

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