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[PN] Part 4

[PT] Politics

[CT] **Empire, Language and Nationhood: Japanese Colonial Cinema in Korea and Manchuria**

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At its zenith in 1942, the Japanese Empire was a vast, multinational, multiethnic and multilingual structure that covered over 7,400,000 square kilometers and contained nearly six percent of the world's total population. Unique as the only non-Western empire of modern times,¹ the Japanese Empire began with the cession of Taiwan in 1895. It rapidly expanded to include Karafuto/Sakhalin (colonized in 1905); Korea (colonized in 1910 after a period as a “protectorate”); German Micronesia (colonized in 1914); and Manchuria, also known as Manchukuo (transformed into a protectorate in 1931).² Japan's initial success in the Pacific War would also see Hong Kong, Indonesia, Singapore and British Malaya come under Japanese rule.

This chapter examines the specific cinematic application and engagement of the language laws and ideologies of this imperial period. Throughout the Japanese imperial period, cinema was utilized as “a vehicle for disseminating images and ideologies of Empire”³ across the controlled territories. The mechanisms of the Empire's engagement with the multiplicity of languages in its territories, and the consequences of these approaches, can be charted within the films that were produced during this period. The empire, however, was not a monolith, and this chapter examines the differences between two of the largest and most

important Japanese territories: Manchuria and Korea. The distinction between colonialism and imperialism is important to highlight at this juncture. In basic terms, colonialism refers to practices (conquering of land, exploitation of resources and so on), while imperialism refers to the (political, economic, but also, ideological) ideas driving these practices. The Japanese Empire was both colonial and imperial in nature, and it is essential to evaluate and examine the different territories with this in mind. Because Japan's relationship to Manchuria was imperial rather than colonial, the linguistic approach adopted by Japan in this territory differed from that present in Korea, which had been an official colony since 1910 (and a controlled territory since 1876).

Multilingualism for many is a positive term: The ability to converse and engage across linguistic boundaries speaks to the current popular global ethos of connectivity. In the moment of empire, however, the notion of multilingualism becomes imbued with different and often negative systems of meaning and modes of articulation. Japanese language education came hand-in-hand with the move toward empire and was a key marker in Japan's development from a rural and closed society to a modern imperial power in under fifty years. Compulsory education was implemented in Japan throughout the 1870s following the Meiji Restoration (1868) and focused on the standardization of Japanese. Regional dialects were strongly discouraged, and the languages of the Ainu and the Ryukyans (ethnic groups living in northern Japan and Okinawa) were actively repressed and nearly eradicated.⁴ The "official" Japanese that emerged from this period was heavily (and often violently) promoted across the Imperial territories,⁵ and language polices were closely interlinked with the empire's approach to the assimilation and integration of non-Japanese colonial and imperial subjects.

As Carol O’Sullivan has recently argued, language in the cinema (both written and spoken) exists as both a “signifying code or vehicle and always an object of representation.”⁶ Cinematic language is therefore an institution “deeply embedded in multiform relations of power,”⁷ and in the colonial or imperial movement, a benchmark of the dominant discourse. Cinema in the Japanese territories would be influenced not only by the language of production, but also by the linguistic forms that it would be asked to present and support. New terms and their correspondent ideologies, such as *Tōa renmei* (East Asian League), *Tōa kyōdōtai* (East Asian Community), *Dao-Tōa Kyōeiken* (Greater East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere), *gozoku kyōwa* (five ethnic groups living in harmony) and *Hakko Ichiu* (All Eight Corners of the World under One Roof), had not previously existed in the popular lexicon. Even the very name Manchuria/Manchukuo was a creation from this period: A translation of the Japanese word *Manshū*, it was seen as so loaded with symbolism that it would be rejected in China after the decline of the Japanese Empire. While language issues were present in all aspects of the Japanese Empire, cinema, as a key visual and auditory medium, was a site where the language debate became highly visible, forcing the film industry to tackle head-on the language policies and laws. This emerged simultaneously with the attempt to entertain a diverse audience, both in Japan and in the territories it controlled, and of course, to turn a profit. Films made in the colonial/imperial moment therefore needed to elucidate and celebrate the key tenets of the Japanese imperial rhetoric while trying to be commercially successful. This chapter examines how the linguistic construction of the Japanese Empire affected production and reception, and via a focus on specific examples from Manchuria and Korea, charts the development that emerged in the Japanese filmic language policies from 1937 to 1945. In doing so, it argues that multilingualism in colonial Korea and Imperial Manchuria was a complex and mutable issue that simultaneously supported and challenged the very ethos of the Japanese Empire.

[A] Colonial Korea

Korea was colonized in 1895 and opened to cinematic production in 1897. The Korean cinema of this period was therefore heavily intertwined with the politics of the region and cannot be extricated from Japanese influence. This does not mean, however, that a Korean cinema did not exist in its own right: Although often censored, Korean cinema successfully operated throughout the 1920s and early 1930s, with a number of studios making silent films. The introduction of commercial sound in the late 1920s posed a challenge that Korean cinema struggled to negotiate, but in 1935, Lee Myeong-woo's retelling of the classical tale of Chunhyang-jeon allowed the Korean audience to hear its own language on screen for the first time. The arrival of sound, although a great step forward in cinematic modernity, raised issues for the colonial government, particularly in relation to language policies and the continual pressure to enforce Japanese as the main language of the peninsula. Gradually, artistic freedom was eroded, and by August 1, 1940, all films in Korea came under the rigorously enforced Chosun Film Laws. Based on the 1939 Japan Film Laws, the key tenets in the legislation were designed to censor, and potentially, ban any films that were perceived to criticize Japan; Japanese symbols, such as the Emperor; or Japan's economic, cultural, military and foreign policies. Acts perceived as potentially corrupting morals or challenging authority were also prohibited. Staff was required to register for a work card in order to be employed in the film industry, and all citizens were expected to use their official Japanese names rather than their Korean originals. All film production and distribution became consolidated under the official Chosun Film Production Company and the Chosun Film

Distribution Corporation, and in 1942, attending “educational films” became compulsory for Korean citizens.

Alongside this practical control of production, distribution and exhibition, there emerged a clear desire to eliminate “Korean-ness” from the locally produced films.⁸ Despite the fact that many Koreans were far from fluent in Japanese, with numerous older or less educated people unable to operate at all in the language,⁹ 1938 saw the colony move officially from a bilingual policy to a monolingual one—including ending all mother-tongue education and threatening members of the Korean Language Research Society with arrest and jail.¹⁰ In line with this shift, the film laws demanded that all productions be conducted in the “national language” of Japanese.¹¹ The use of “national language” (*kokugo*) rather than simply the “Japanese language” (*nihongo*) implied a vision of a united nationhood rather than an enforced shift to a second or foreign language. Assimilation entailed embracing Japanese as Korea’s “national language” rather than seeing it as a foreign language. In 1925, Aoyagi Tsunatarō, a highly influential right-wing newspaper editor, made a statement that succinctly summarizes the aims of the language policies:

[EXT] Our great national abilities can advance the Korean culture; they can also raise the achievement of Korean development. By creating an harmonious balance between intellectual and moral education, within 50-100 years that which is known to be Japanese-Korean will cease to exist, and we shall see on the Asian continent an intermarriage assimilation (*tsūkon dōka*) of perfect harmony among the peoples of the greater Japanese race.¹²

Films from 1936 to 1945 were all clearly developed to promote the concept of naeseon ilche (in Korean) or naisen ittai (Japanese): in other words, “Japan and Korea as one body.” This “one body” approach was in reality nothing more than an attempt to condition Koreans to become Japanese citizens (albeit second class ones), and hence, to assist in Japan’s mobilization for total war.

I have chosen here to engage with the fictional recruitment films that were seen in the Korean cinemas from 1941 onward. This isolation of the recruitment drive encouraging Korean citizens to join the Japanese army allows for a focus on the narratives that were being told to the Korean population about their relationship to Japan and the Empire. By 1937, the Second Sino-Japanese War was beginning to take its toll, and it was becoming clear that Japan needed more bodies on the ground. As a result of this lack, Korea became the site of manpower to feed the military machine. In addition, by 1941, Japanese linguistic policies banned the use of the Korean language in all public spaces, including cinemas, while the heavily enforced Chosen Film Production Codes constricted all films made in Korea to be solely in Japanese, with no indication that Korea was ever a bilingual nation save for the actors’ often stilted and heavily accented rendering of Japanese lines. The recruitment films ranging from late 1940 to 1945 are therefore particularly interesting for tracing the move from bilingualism to monolingualism within the period of one year, and are ideal subjects to chart the changing linguistic policies and the tensions they raised. The volunteer program was constructed as an idealized “right” that Japan was magnanimously granting its Korean (male) citizens, an approach that was certainly in keeping with the tone of paternalistic love that Japan apparently felt for the nation it perceived as its less civilized and less developed colonial child. The sentiment is clearly illustrated in a 1942 article published in the Asahi newspaper:

[EXT] Due to the ever-strengthening trend towards the incorporation of Korea as an Imperial nation, and in response to the ardent loyalty of heart shown by Koreans, the government has decided to extend military conscription to Korea.¹³

The first of the recruitment films, *Volunteer* (Ji-wonbyeong, Ahn Seok-young, 1940; released in 1941) was produced at the beginning of the military recruitment program and distributed across Korea four months before conscription was due to begin.¹⁴ With the average cinema audience numbers in 1940's Korea equaling more than 20 million, the power and effectiveness of this mode of cinematic propaganda should not be overlooked.¹⁵ *Volunteer* follows the life of Chun-ho, a patriotic individual who dreams of joining the Japanese army. It takes place in the period just before Koreans were allowed to enlist and follows Chun-ho as he laments being unable to fulfil his patriotic duty and suffers from pained (and fairly homoerotic) imaginings of rows of marching soldiers parading under the Japanese flag. Chun-ho refuses to make a firm commitment to his fiancée Bun-ok and struggles to support his mother and younger sister. Finally, his dreams are realized and he is allowed to enlist in the army. Admiring of his "patriotic spirit," his previously unsympathetic landlord agrees to help support his mother and sister, and Chun-ho leaves via a large bedecked troop train as the loving Bun-ok and his Japanese mentor wave to him.

This overt propaganda piece offers a very positive spin on the collaboration and integration of Korea and Japan via military recruitment. For Chun-ho, the ability to join the military offers a chance to demonstrate his love for the empire and his commitment to the

objectives of the colonial government. The following quote from the film clearly articulates its tone and ideology (dialogue is conducted in Korean with Japanese subtitles):

[EXT]

Chun-ho: The annexation is complete now but young Koreans should serve the Empire at war too. Even if we want to, we are not allowed to do so. We are not eligible. How can we really work in unity like this?

Chang-sik: If such time comes are you willing to step forward?

Chun-ho: Don't you know me yet? When we were kids we swore we would walk the same path. If you become a driver in Seoul, you should serve at the front. We have our duty.

[Figure 14.1]

[FIG] Figure 14.1: Japanese language subtitles and Korean language merge in the Chun-ho's patriotic speech in Volunteer (Ahn Seok-young, 1941). Production by Dong-a Films.

This process of extrapolation of the duties of the colonial subject was directly aimed at the audience members and was in keeping with rhetoric presented in newsreels, local

newspapers and pamphlets. The dialogue also articulates the desire that the colonial subject feels for Japan in the film. Michael Baskett has adroitly labeled the Japanese Empire as an “Attractive Empire”—one that aims to inspire its citizens—and this is what is clearly being presented here. Accordingly, the language of the film, although conducted for the most part in Korean, is littered with terminology (such as *naeseon ilche*) related to togetherness and cooperation. Yet, the film’s function as a propaganda tool also raises some key issues related to the biopolitics of colonial power. There is a question of exteriority at the heart of the colonial: In short, is there an outside to power? The Foucauldian notion of power as not “something that is acquired, seized or shared, something that one holds on to or allows to slip away,” but rather as something that is “exercised from innumerable points”¹⁶ is here helpful. The articulation of colonial power becomes one and the same as the articulation of resistance to that very power. In *Volunteer, Chun-ho*, as the film’s main contact point between the colonial subject and the imperial narratives, becomes the site where resistance and dominance are intertwined. Rather than presenting a united front, the film in fact highlights the tensions between *kominka* (Japan as a unique and superior nation) and *naisen ittai/naeseon ilche*, as Chun-ho’s inability to join the army, and the problems that stem from this, deliberately raise the question of the inequality inherent in the system. For the volunteer, this potentially problematic situation is easily resolved when the edict banning recruitment is lifted and he can finally join the Japanese army. Nevertheless, the question of inequality has been raised, and while it is resolved within the film itself, in the wider world the Korean audience members would have been more than aware that the inequalities presented were deeply embedded in everyday reality.

The linguistic makeup of the film becomes pertinent as we see the characters move between Korean and Japanese with ease, while Japanese subtitles are provided for the large swathes of the film conducted in Korean. Yet, although the film was made before 1942 (the

point where only Japanese could be spoken), no Korean subtitles are provided when Japanese is spoken or Japanese newspapers are shown. Volunteer therefore suggests that all citizens should be able to understand both written and spoken Japanese. A linguistic hierarchy is established where Japanese, as the perceived lingua franca, is the normative mode through which people can converse and operate. This is further consolidated by the frequent addition of Japanese terms and phrases that had become integrated into the Korean language over the period of colonization.¹⁷ Personal indicators (aite, koibito) and words such as karuma (car), kao (face), ijimeru (to bully), kaimono (to shop) are heard, as throughout other films from this period. This is accompanied by the transference of many Japanese grammar rules and lexicons (nouns, verbs, idioms) into the Korean syntax.¹⁸ Volunteer represents Korean as a secondary language (and by extension, a secondary nationality), and although the film is one of the last made under occupation to extensively feature spoken Korean, it nonetheless manifests the move toward the eradication of the Korean language and the radical assimilation of the Korean people as a separate entity.

Prior to the enactment of the language laws, linguistic markers were one of the few ways that the audience could clearly distinguish between Japanese and Korean citizens. Physically, the two nation's inhabitants were almost identical, so once this marker of language was removed, it would be up to the plots of the films to construct a Korean subject who spoke Japanese and had a Japanese name, but was not, ironically, a Japanese citizen. Although the mostly Japanese *Suicide Squad on the Watchtower* (*Bōrō no kesshitai*, Imai Tadashi, 1943) does in fact offer a small amount of Korean, the latter's inclusion is more telling than its absence in other films. The Korean troops are asked to speak some of "their own language" and then perform a Korean dance for their Japanese superiors; their language and culture are thus reduced to little more than an amusing party trick. This lack of Korean as a "proper" language is further emphasized via written signs (most notably the one in the school) that

frequently remind the citizens to use only kokugo. Once again, the notion of Korean as a secondary and obsolete language (and by extension culture) is reinforced through the film's diegesis. At one point, for example, the film highlights the problems with pronunciation that a young Korean boy is having while studying Japanese. This, alongside the signs encouraging the use of the national language and the focus on the need to speak Japanese correctly as a sign of a good education, makes it clear that the language policies posited the fluent knowledge of Japanese as vital to achieving success under the colonial regime. This emphasis is equally pronounced in *Portrait of Youth* (*Wakaki sugata*, Shiro Toyota, 1943; entirely in Japanese), where school and language education again play an important role in the encouragement and molding of young Korean men into upstanding Japanese citizens, while at the same time, illustrating the benevolence and care of the Japanese rulers.

For many politicians in Japan the importance of encouraging/forcing the colonial populations to speak Japanese was clear. In 1939, Education Minister and General Araki Sadao directly referenced Ueda Kazutoshi's theory of language as the "spiritual blood" of Japan and expounded the belief that this blood would trickle down and help form the new Japan-led East Asian order.¹⁹ Indeed, one of the key idiosyncrasies of the recruitment films is that although assimilation is apparently the main narrative aim, there is a constant need to distinguish between the two nationalities in order to maintain a narrative of development and of the superior role of Japan. The multilingual nature of the Empire would, ironically, have been a great card to play in the battle to win hearts and minds entailed in Japan's ideology of *Hakko Ichiu*, were it not that the imperialistic and nationalistic narrative of *kominka* ensured the repression of any language and culture that was not Japanese. As a result, Japan's language policies in this period were never able to fully deal with the basic contradiction that if language was the "life-blood" and "heart" of a unique Japan and Japanese culture, what did it mean when those who were not Japanese claimed the language as their own? This tension

was never resolved and the language politics of the period reflect the contradiction of maintaining a distinction between the two nationalities while encouraging their conflation into one united “Japanese” identity. Not surprisingly, the films made from 1941 onward are marked by the poor pronunciation and general lack of language fluency of many of the actors. For the Korean audience, the sheer fact of being forced to speak Japanese became a linguistic signpost of its own repression, while for the Japanese audience it provided a further indication of the lack of sophistication of the empire’s Korean citizens. In this way, language itself became an unacknowledged marker of colonial suppression rather than colonial assimilation, highlighting difference rather than eradicating it. The subaltern is denied a voice, denied the right to speak, except in the words of the colonizer.

Not surprisingly, language education also became a tool through which the colonial subject was placed into the role of child at the instructive hands of the father. An illustrative example of this can be found in *Dear Soldier* (Byeongjeongnim, Baek Un-Haeng, 1944), one of the last films made during the war period, in which no Korean is spoken. *Dear Soldier* follows a group of young recruits who have been drafted into the army as they train with their Japanese commanders, and finally, depart for the Chinese Front.²⁰ The below is taken from a scene in which a young soldier returns home to visit his sick father and makes the decision to address his village about the positives of military life.

[EXT] When I first entered the army, our sergeant and commander told me that an army squad is like a home to its soldiers. According to my experience it is. The commander is my father, the major my mother, the lieutenant my brother, our sergeant my sister. I even learned to wipe myself in the toilet from my sergeant. I’m not

joking. I had to learn how to protect myself from getting a contagious disease. If you follow the orders of your superior officers and do your best at the tasks given to you, military life is neither strict nor difficult...so don't worry, and go and get yourselves examined. Be proud to enlist. And parents, you can rest assured and send your precious sons to the Army.

As the above quote illustrates, the alignment of the Korean troops with infants and children is made clear throughout the film. The inability to care for one's own bodily functions and the requirement of instruction in this area is an ideal means of inscribing the Korean body as a site of masculine lack. In Japan, Korean masculinity was subordinate in both a literal and theoretical sense. Korean men were denied access to the central components of masculinity—that is, patriarchal power and authority—and reduced to the status of infants, politically, legally, socially and verbally. The repression of language, and the suppression and denigration of Korean customs resulted in a Korean masculinity that was unable to define itself in any positive light except in relation to the Empire. Yet, the bodily and cultural separation that marked everyday colonizer/colonized relations could, as the military recruitment films show, be eradicated in the embrace of the imperial military uniform. Joining the army could forge a path to equality between Japanese and Korean men. Yet, if we observe the films' linguistic aspects, it becomes clear that this equality was a fallacy. Rather than presenting Korean subjects who were active in their engagement, the language politics of the later films resulted in subjects who were nothing more than imitations of a notion of the Korean subject—a subject without a name and without original voice.

The aim of the volunteer films, and indeed, of the Korean Film Laws more broadly, was to produce a normative linguistic, aesthetic and cultural template that could be applied across the wider Korean cultural frames. To this end, films such as *Dear Soldier* were heavily restricted in their subversive potential, but they did, via their very failure, enable the creation of what Louis Althusser has termed “the bad subject”: that is, the subject “who sees through the interpellative function of ideology and begins to counter-identify with it.”²¹ In *Dear Soldier*, the Korean subject is denied an authentic voice while masquerading as an idealized citizen. These films therefore function as an elucidating text on the loss of language just as a language is being spoken. While the language is fluent, the accents are not. They thus serve only to further remove the Korean subjects from the role (of loyal Japanese citizens) that they are being asked to undertake. This leads to an “undermining (of) the intended ideological and historical determination of [the subject's] identity,”²² to quote Mpalive-Hangson Msiska, and allows us to see the “unveiling of the very real terms by which the colonial truth is constituted.”²³ The film therefore presents a symbolic distance between inside and outside, *naichi* (homeland) and *gaichi* (colonies), reality and delusion; in short, between Korea and Japan.

[A] Imperial Manchuria

While attempts to eradicate the colonial Korean language were made under the name of assimilation, a different approach was required for the imperial territories. Although Manchuria was entirely controlled by the Japanese, it was in fact not a colony in the traditional sense, but officially a civilian nation-state that was specifically articulated as

“independent” for a variety of political reasons. Though highly nationalistic in approach, the Japanese Empire had kept at its heart the notion of East Asian cooperation as justification for the imperial project, and various terms were utilized over the years to try to capture this desire for togetherness. The East Asian league (*Tōa renmei*) and the East Asian Community (*Tōa kyōdōtai*) were gradually formed into the well-promoted ideology of the *Dao-Tōa Kyōeiken* or Greater East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere. The narrative of Manchuria as an “independent” state with its own ruler (the puppet monarch Puyi), working hand-in-hand with Japan to build a new and successful modern country, was exactly what the Japanese Imperial system wished to present to western powers. This in no way meant that Japan was willing to let areas of East Asia refuse its “friendship” and leadership, or that it in any way refuted Japanese ideals about the country’s clear superiority over the rest of Asia, but it did complicate the relationship that was supposed to exist between Japan and Manchuria. In Manchuria, as in Korea, cinema would be seen as a key means by which to present the Empire’s objectives, but industrial and artistic development would play a much more crucial role than it did in the Korean context. Films from this region hoped to be more than just propaganda: They also sought to raise the bar in terms of entertainment and to challenge the domination of Hollywood across the wider Asian sphere. The *Manshu Eiga Kyokai* (Manchukuo Film Association Ltd, henceforth Man’ei) was based on the UFA, Hollywood and Cinecittà models of vertically integrated production, distribution and exhibition, and was thus more than a typical propaganda unit. Man’ei was founded in 1937 as a joint venture between the Manchukuo government and the South Manchurian Railway company, and its named Head, Amakasu Masahiko, was determined to create a studio that would be the most modern in Asia.

The territory itself was a complex one. As Prasenjit Duara suggests, Manchuria was a transnational phenomenon, a site where several imperial powers nourished ambitions for

political hegemony. The invasion of China proper in 1937 (until which time Japan had restricted herself to Manchuria) saw the commencement of the Second Sino-Japanese War, and Manchuria became the key supply base for the Japanese offensive. Mass immigration from Japan to Manchuria (ensuing from the promotion of Manchuria as an inhabitable space that could compensate for Japan's own lack in these terms), would result in increasing tensions between the local inhabitants and the new settlers. Although the regime in Manchuria was undeniably brutal, the aim, unlike in Korea, was not to completely assimilate the local population. The approach in Manchuria was premised on the integration of the Chinese community, with Japan controlling the region's vast land and potential resources; in short, on the creation of obedient citizens rather than necessarily loyal ones. In a further divergence from its Korean policies, Japan never legislated an official language for Manchuria. Japanese here was seen more as a possible goodwill lingua franca—*kyōeiken-go* or coprosperity language—that would unite everyone under the auspices of the coprosperity sphere. Although idealized as harmonious, language was thus, in fact, a clear point of tension. The very ideological concept of *Gozoku kyōwa* (five ethnic groups living in harmony) itself indicated the problem: The prospect of five languages living in accord would seriously struggle if no common method of communication could be established. People's ability or inability to communicate with each other was a problem that the film industry would have to cope with, and would become one of the key barriers to coproductions between Chinese and Japanese studios. Language too would become a site of tension as Chinese was often poorly rendered by Japanese actors, and even in those cases where a fluent Chinese speaker could be found, the films' narratives would seek to offer controversial representations of Chinese nationals.

Manchuria was as much a fictive ideal as it was a reality, and quickly became a focal point for the development of a new national culture that operated in line with the narratives of

togetherness and pan-Asian development. Duara notes, “Culture, as produced in the new nationalism, represented an important and novel form of knowledge to address problems generated by the divergence of imperialism and nationalism.”²⁴ This culture, which was first envisioned and then promoted, rested on the construction of a hierarchical cultural sphere, with Japan at the top and the Japanese language as the dominant mode of communication, and the other languages of the region (Chinese and Korean) “relegated to semi-colonial status.”²⁵ This contradiction was further exacerbated by the fact that the positive vision of Manchuria, whose landscape held a particular place in Japanese popular imagination as a wide space of romance, excitement and opportunity, was marred by the often-vehement racism that many Japanese people felt toward the region’s inhabitants. Despite Japan’s great designs for Manchuria, violence, murder, repression, rape, and economic and cultural marginalization were rife across the territory.

One of the key players in this proposed national narrative was Yamaguchi Yoshiko/Ri Kōran. Born to Japanese parents in Manchuria and fluent in Chinese, she was the leading star of Man’ei during the 1930s and 1940s, and is certainly one of the most widely discussed and debated stars of this period in global scholarship.²⁶ Ri Kōran operated across cinematic boundaries, and her films were screened across Japan and its colonies. Linguistically, she was a living symbol of the Empire’s desire for transnationalism, and indeed, her very name changed in accordance with the territory she was working in. She was variously known as Li Xianglan or Li Hsiang-lan (China), Ri Kōran (the Japanese pronunciation of her Chinese name) and Yamaguchi Yoshiko. She would later work in the United States as Shirley Yamaguchi. In Yamaguchi’s films, multilingualism became a political narrative of imperialism (through her promotion of Japanese imperial ideologies), vaguely disguised as collectivism and collaboration: In short, she was there to sway hearts and minds toward acceptance of the Japanese Empire. Yet, despite the nature of the films she starred in,

Yamaguchi was tremendously popular with Chinese audiences. Her Chinese was so fluent that after the war she would be tried as a collaborator until her Japanese identity could be clearly proven. She was also an acclaimed and very popular singer (and is to date within the Chinese territories), and many of the songs from her films gained commercial success and enduring popularity.

Significantly, though films in this period often contained both Chinese and Japanese, bilingual stars were few and far between—a lack that Yamaguchi herself would later comment on.²⁷ The tremendous differences between spoken Chinese and Japanese resulted in poorly rendered, often-incomprehensible Chinese that frequently appeared comical to Chinese audiences, while in Japan the similar lack of appeal for badly rendered Japanese meant that home-grown stars were seen as bigger box-office draws than any Chinese actor. In the light of these limitations, Yamaguchi held great value in both economic and ideological terms, and functioned as a symbol of “borderless fantasy” in an idealized construction of an East Asian state.²⁸ As Shelley Stephenson notes, she operated as a “colonizer passing for colonized,” and as a result, “her border-crossing mobility and variable identity elicited a utopic Greater East Asia imaginary where national boundaries and the ethnic and linguistic markings were erased.”²⁹ This borderless fantasy was not, of course, without tension.

Vow in the Desert (*Nessa no chikai*, Watanabe Kunio, 1940) is unusual in that the Japanese workers’ lack of communication skills and their basic inability to engage with their Chinese counterparts are illustrated as negative and potentially problematic. The film focuses on two brothers, Ichiro and Kenji, both engineers, who move to China to focus on the development of the Mainland Chinese infrastructure. The love interest Ho-ran (Yamaguchi) serves as a key narrator and reflector of the benefits that alignment and cooperation with

Japan will bring. Language in the film oscillates between Chinese (spoken by the workers and occasionally Ho-ran) and Japanese. A key moment occurs when Ichiro is shot and killed: Surrounded by Chinese workers with whom he cannot communicate, Kenji comments “If only I could speak their language, I could make myself understood.” The road is saved by Ho-ran who, as a bilingual subject, rushes outside and communicates Kenji and Ichiro’s message of “peace” and their desire to develop China into a modern nation. Albert Memmi’s argument that the colonizer is as equally trapped as the colonized has resonance here: Although the inability to function inside a multilingual environment is shown as a logistical and ideological problem for the imperial subject, the narratives of superiority that so marked the Japanese “right” and “need” to be in Manchuria resulted in a limited desire to learn and adapt to China, leading to tremendous resentment and conflict between Japanese and Manchurian citizens.

Yamaguchi frequently acts as a translator in the fantasy of cooperation, and yet, her very presence as a platform for inter-cultural communication points to the problems inherent with the Empire. She alternates between being an active agent of assimilation and an object to be assimilated, and it is her flux between these two roles that allows her role as interpreter to illuminate the power structures at the very foundation of the imperial moment. As Abé Mark Nornes notes, in the act of translation the “inter-cultural nexus is surging with the flux of power as well, and the translator is caught in the spotlight.”³⁰ Indeed, Yamaguchi’s very presence opens up the problematics of assigning static categories to all the participants operating in Manchuria. In *Vow in the Desert*, Yamaguchi functions as an agent of assimilation, her language skills allowing the Japanese engineers to communicate their desire to help improve Chinese infrastructure; in *Winter Jasmine* (Yingchun hua, Yasushi Sasaki, 1942), she literally acts as a translator and agent of cultural communication as she teaches her Japanese lover some key phrases and helps him to understand Manchuria. It is telling,

however, that when her lover actually tries out some of the phrases on a local rickshaw puller, his pronunciation renders him unintelligible.

There is a sense that for the Japanese citizen, China and its languages will remain ultimately unknowable, and thereby, relegated to a symbolic realm rather than being integrated into the discourse of Empire in any meaningful way. This notion of China as a symbol is most clearly illustrated in the goodwill films, in which Yamaguchi operates as a symbolic entity whose sole purpose is to be assimilated. *China Nights* (*Shina no yoru*, Osamu Fusmitzu, 1940), *Soshu Nights* (*Soshū no yoru*, Hiromasa Nomura, 1941) and *Song of White Orchid* (*Byakuran no uta*, Kuio Watanabe, 1939) all maintain a clear notion of the Chinese people (personified by Yamaguchi) overcoming their initial hostility and gradually understanding the “true” nature and intentions of the Japanese Empire. In *China Nights*, one of the most notorious of the continental trilogy, Yamaguchi plays the role of Keiran, a young orphan Chinese girl who, initially portrayed as “a real Japanese hater,” is transformed once she sees the love and care that is given to her by Hase, a Japanese naval officer. In *Soshu Nights*, she plays the head of an orphanage who reverts from her anti-Japanese stance once she sees the care a Japanese doctor devotes to the local population. And in *Song of White Orchid*, she plays an initially pro-Japanese singer who, after a series of miscommunications with her Japanese lover, is persuaded to join the Chinese guerrillas by her brother. Ultimately, of course, she rejoins her Japanese lover and they die side-by-side defending Japanese interests from the Chinese insurgents.

[Figure 14.2]

[FIG] Figure 14.2: Yamaguchi as cultural translator in *Soshu Nights* (Hiromasa Nomura, 1941). When the local Japanese doctor is injured she realizes his “true intentions” toward the Chinese people.

In all of these cases, the translator is placed at the heart of the imperial narrative: Through her ability to transcend linguistic barriers, Yamaguchi opens up the discourse to both sides of the spectrum. This opening between the Chinese and Japanese citizens shuts down the closed circuit that the imperial propaganda machine hoped to tell. Although the goodwill films were often insulting to China, they became more than the sum of their parts, and ultimately, failed as propaganda. Michael Baskett has commented that because of the struggle *Man'ai* had in balancing success and ideology, the messages that the goodwill films were giving “had an ambivalence that opened them up to a variety of possible readings.”³¹ In line with this potential for alternative readings, Yiman Wang has noted the films’ affective power, not just as propaganda, but also as sites of entertainment, romance and escape. Focusing on their musical aspects, Wang observes that music “was so elevated that it was seen as an art form that would potentially outlive and transcend.”³² Via the linguistics of the musicals, language itself became not the site of repression, but rather a means by which the structures of imperialism could be put on show, ultimately allowing for multiple possibilities of reinforcing, derailing or reconstituting political discourse.³³ In this way, Yamaguchi’s borderless linguistic crossing allows for the emergence of a debate on the specific context of its production and dissemination. The colonizer and the colonized are caught in the same nexus of political power; the translator, personified by Yamaguchi, becomes the symbol through which this discourse is played out, rather than a means to circumvent it.

[N] Notes

1. Ramon H. Myers and Mark R. Peattie. *The Japanese Colonial Empire, 1895–945* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 6.
2. Please see later sections on the exact definitions under which Manchuria was occupied and controlled.
3. James Chapman and Nicholas J. Cull, *Projecting Empire: Imperialism and Popular Cinema* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2009), 1.
4. Four out of the six Ryukuan languages have been labeled as “definitely endangered” while the other two are deemed “critically endangered” by UNESCO.
5. Chen Ping, “Policy on the Selection and Implementation of a Standard Language as a Source of Conflict in Taiwan,” in *Language Planning and Language Policy: East Asian Perspectives* (Richmond: Routledge Curzon 2001), 95–110; Akiko Matsumori, “Ryukyuan. Past, Present and Future,” in *Multilingual Japan*, ed. John C. Maher and Kyoko Yashiro (Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 1995), 19–45.
6. Carol O’Sullivan, *Translating Popular Film* (London and New York: Palgrave Mcmillian, 2011), 17.
7. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, “The Cinema After Babel: Language, Difference, Power,” *Screen* 26, nos. 3–4 (May 1985): 35–58.

8. Karashima Takeshi quoted in Brian Yecies and Ae-Gyung Shim, *Korea's Occupied Cinemas, 1893–1948: The Untold History of the Film Industry* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 133.
9. See Sonia Ryang, “Inscribed (Men’s) Bodies, Silent (Women’s) Words: Rethinking Colonial Displacement in Koreans in Japan.” *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 30, no. 4 (1998): 3–15.
10. Nonetheless, the Korean Language movement—in short, the desire to speak and promote the Korean language in its own right—was one of the few nationalist movements that enjoyed support from nearly the entire Korean population. See Choong Soon Kim, *A Korean Nationalist Entrepreneur: A Life History of Kim Songsu, 1891–1955* (New York: SUNY Press, 1998), 93.
11. Broadly, we can see nihongo to be the neutral term to describe the Japanese language. Nihongo is used to describe the language as it is taught as a second language or to foreigners “whilst kokugo is the language taught to Japanese people in Japanese schools.” From the “Translators notes” in Lee Yeoun-suk, *The Ideology of Kokugo*, translated by Maki Hitano Hubbard (Honolulu: University of Hawaii press, 2010), xv.
12. Aoyagi quoted in Mark Caprio, *Japanese Assimilation Policies in Colonial Korea, 1910–1945* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009), 115.
13. *Asahi Shinbun* (May 10, 1942).
14. Yecies and Shim, *Occupied Cinemas*, 121.
15. *Samcheolli* (January 1941) quoted in Yecies and Shim, *Occupied Cinemas*, 163.

16. Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge* (London: Penguin, 1979), 94.
17. M.J. Ree, *The Doomed Empire: Japan in Colonial Korea* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1997), 58–59.
18. See Kumatani, Akiyasu, *Kaihōsen chōsengo ni taisure nihongo no gengo kanshō*, *Bunka Kunkyū* 6 (1991), 215–65; and Rhee, *The Doomed Empire*, 58.
19. Wakako Higuchi, *The Japanese Administration of Guam, 1941–1944* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2013), 133.
20. As the war continued past 1942, the recruitment drive went from volunteer to compulsory and a draft system was implemented.
21. Althusser, *Lenin*, 115–124.
22. Msiska, “Genre: Fidelity and Transgression in the Post-Colonial African Novel,” in *Locating Postcolonial Narrative Genres*, ed. Walter Goebel and Saskia Schabio (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), 78.
23. *Ibid.*, 78.
24. Duara, *Sovereignty and Authenticity*, 17.
25. Annika A. Culver, “Manchukuo and the Creation of a New Multi-ethnic Literature: Kawabata Ysunari’s Promotion of Manchurian Culture, 1941–1942,” in *Sino-Japanese Transculturation*, ed. Richard King, Cody Poulton and Katushiko Endo (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books), 192.

26. See note 41 for a list of just a few of the English language studies. Key Japanese studies include Yomota Inuhiko's *Ri Kōran no higashi* (Tokyo: Tokyo Saigaku Shuppankai, 2001) and *Nihon no joyū* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2000). Yamaguchi herself also published several autobiographies.

27. Quoted in Michael Baskett, *The Attractive Empire: Transnational Film Culture in Imperial Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008), 77.

28. See also Yiman Wang's "Between the National and the Transnational: Li Xianglan/Yamaguchi Yoshiko and Pan-Asianism," *IIAS Newsletter* 38 (2005): 7–8; and "Screening Asia: Passing, Performative Translation, and Reconfiguration," *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 15, no. 2 (September 2007): 319–43; and Shelley Stephenson, "'Her Traces Are Found Everywhere': Shanghai, Li Xianglan, and the 'Greater East Asian Film Sphere,'" in *Cinema and Urban Culture in Shanghai, 1922–1943* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 222–45.

29. Stephenson, "Her Traces," 242.

30. Abé Mark Nornes, *Cinema Babel: Translating Global Film* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 35.

31. Michael Baskett, "Goodwill Hunting: Rediscovering and Remembering Manchukuo in Japanese 'Goodwill Films,'" in *Crossed Histories: Manchuria in the Age of Empire*, ed. Mariko Asano Tamanoi (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005), 22.

32. Yiman Wang, "Affective Politics and the Legend of Yamaguchi Yoshiko/Li Xianglan," in King, Poulton and Endo, eds., *Sino-Japanese Tranculturation*, 147.

33. *Ibid.*, 163.

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