Ticklish Contact Zones: Colonial, Inter-Imperial, and Trans-Pacific Encounters in/around the Japanese Empire

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Let us open in medias res with a scene from a travelogue film. In a dynamic composition that harkens back to Lumière brothers’ Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat (France, 1896), a locomotive emerges from the depth of the screen and passes the camera that is positioned diagonally to the tracks. Instead of La Ciotat in Southern France, however, this is “Tumen station on the Manchuria-Chōsen border,” as the English-language narrator announces using the names preferred by the Japanese for its colonial territories in Northeast China and Korea. In keeping with the travelogue’s genre convention, the narrator involves his audience in describing local sites of interest: “we discover an interesting novelty, woman customs inspectors” (emphasis mine). The travelogue genre is, as Jeffrey Ruoff observes, characterized by the non-linear presentational logic of episodic narration much like the experimental genre of essay films, but it is the use of the collective pronoun, “we,” that distinguishes it from its experimental counterpart which more commonly uses the first-person singular “I.” Needless to say, the enunciation of “we” is as exclusionary as it is inclusionary; identification with the collective
pronoun is predicated on accepting binaries such as disembodied masculine voices versus objectified female bodies, bourgeois leisurely mobility versus perilous journeys of laborers, and Anglophone discourse versus non-Western locales. Yet, a rupture emerges to destabilize these binaries precisely when the referent of the “interesting novelty” appears onscreen: a female officer dressed in a dark double-breasted uniform, briskly inspecting a female traveler, dressed in Korean clothes and carrying two small bundles.

In a jovial yet condescending tone, the narrator verbalizes the traveler’s imaginary protest: “Stop! You’re tickling me.” If, as Jennifer Lynn Peterson has suggested, the viewing contexts of early travelogue films might be called “virtual contact zones” where spectators experienced highly asymmetrical encounters of traveler-filmmakers and filmed subjects in the safe space of movie theaters, the abrupt invocation of the spectators’ bodies (tickled into existence, as it were) attests to the volatility of such “safe” modes of spectatorship.
An instance of cross-gender, inter-class, and interracial identification such as the one summarized above serves to illustrate the methodological dilemma this paper seeks to highlight regarding whether the task of film scholars lies in demystifying the colonial imaginary reproduced in travelogue films or in attending to the affective dimension of travel images that makes the semantics of travelogue films ultimately unfinished, plural, and open to unexpected connections. Existing scholarship by Mary Louise Pratt, James R. Ryan, and Jennifer Lynn Peterson among others has sufficiently established the necessary correlation between Euro-American imperial expansion in the late nineteenth century and the development of travel genres respectively in literature, photography, and cinema. The imperial context is even harder to miss in the case of modern Japan, where Thomas Cook-style tourism arrived in the form of a battlefield tour of Korea and Manchuria in the immediate aftermath of the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905. This paper focuses on imperial Japan’s travelogues that sought to promote Korea-Manchuria tour not just to imperial subjects, but more broadly to Western, notably US, spectators in the pivotal years following the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937. While I draw on important studies that have placed these films in proper historical contexts (thus fulfilling the work of demystifying the imperial phantasmagoria), I will demonstrate how attention to the affective charge of travel images points us to a more general understanding of travelogue films not so much as projections of a particular empire’s imaginary than as a common currency traded among industrial societies.

The scene I described above belongs to a PR film entitled Nai-sen-man shūyu no tabi: Manshū (Japan-Korea-Manchuria Tour: Manchuria, hereafter JKMT: Manchuria) produced in 1937 by the South Manchurian Railway Company (Mantetsu), a state-backed conglomerate driving the economic development in and colonial exploitation of Japanese-occupied territories in Northeast China. For the critical task of placing the film in proper historical contexts, let us turn to Guo Yuan’s meticulously researched study. Guo places the film in three specific contexts: the founding of Manchukuo (Japan’s puppet regime) in 1932 which increased the traffic to Manchuria via Korea; the dramatic expansion of Mantetsu’s railway network from a mere 1,100 km in 1932 to over 10,000 km in 1939 which added previously inaccessible sites to the already popular Korea-Manchuria itinerary (originating in 1906); and the ultimately unrealized 1940 Tokyo Olympic Games which were expected to increase the number of tourists visiting Japan and potentially to the colonies.
These contexts afford Guo a detached critical vantage point from which to observe the schism between the material conditions in Manchuria, still a stronghold of anti-Japanese resistance that posed a danger to Japanese tourists, and the imaginary of a safe and desirable travel destination constructed in the film.6

For all the meticulous research, however, Guo’s study falls short on assessing what, if any, attraction the film had for spectators outside imperial Japan’s sphere of influence. For instance, documentary evidence suggests that the English version was completed only in early 1939, that is, well after the 1940 Olympic Games had been officially called off.7 A different motive is called for to explain the presence of the English version and the broader implications of such trans-Pacific, inter-imperial collaboration. There are indications that JKMT: Manchuria was shipped to the Consular Generals in Sidney and in Los Angeles in January 1939, and that another print accompanied the Japanese delegate to the Sixth Japan-America Student Conference held at the University of Southern California in August.8 Could it be that JKMT: Manchuria was, in the end, a self-congratulatory project made for no obvious audience other than the small groups invited to cultural diplomatic screenings? If this were the case, a travelogue appears to be an odd choice given the genre’s decidedly middlebrow orientation that makes it more suitable for popular, not specialist, education. By the same token, it becomes questionable if a film with such limited reception merits rigorous critique of its presumably negligible ideological impact unless we can articulate the broader impact of the travelogue as a genre. In fact, this was a film produced as part of a larger ensemble of travelogue films originally intended for a different occasion with a much broader audience: The Golden Gate International Exhibition (GGIE) in San Francisco and the New York World’s Fair (NYWF) both in 1939. As Yamamoto Sae, among others, has pointed out, Japanese organizers saw the two expos as a perfect opportunity to court American tourists and promote the empire’s geopolitical ambitions.9 The Japanese Pavilion at GGIE, in particular, featured a section devoted to tourism with an oversized cartographic mural displaying “Greater East Asian Tourism Bloc,” an ideological construct uniting Japan, Korea, and Northeast China under the banner of tourism.10

It would be imprudent, however, to conclude that travelogue films served the same kind of ideological role as the cartographic mural. In fact, owing to the strong public opposition in the US against Japan’s occupation of Manchuria, all Mantetsu exhibits were pulled out at the last minute, relegating the center
spot to the Board of Tourism Industry (BTI), the PR arm of the Japanese Government Railways, founded in 1930 specifically to attract overseas tourists. Particularly notable among BTI’s travelogues was *Tokyo-Peking* (a.k.a *From Tokyo to Peking through Chosen*, 1939), which covered similar travel attractions as *JKMT: Manchuria* and featured what sounds like the same American narrator for its English monologue. Judging by the media coverage BTI received for its novel initiative of “coproducing” *Tokyo-Peking*—namely by sending unedited rushes to the US where an American company took charge of writing the script, recording the narration, and editing the film—it is reasonable to estimate that Mantetsu’s English-narration version of *JKMT: Manchuria* was a byproduct of BTI’s initiative that never reached its intended audience.

There is a limit to studying any given travelogue film in isolation. “Indeed, as Vinzenz Hediger and Patrick Vonderau have argued in the context of industrial nonfiction films produced in corporate and bureaucratic organizations, these films ought to be analyzed serially rather than individually, so that we might find certain patterns that elucidate the organizational logic that informed the films’ production.” Their observation is applicable to imperial Japan’s travelogue films which were produced in the context of industrial public relations, by technocratic producers working for quasi-governmental tourism boosters such as Mantetsu, BTI, the Government-General of Korea, and the Society of International Culture (or KBS, founded in 1934 by Ministries of Education and Foreign Affairs). Moreover, these technocrat-producers themselves discussed their roles not so much as artists than as rationalist bureaucrats and treated their works as serial products available to be circulated, reedited, and mass-disseminated as stock footages not necessarily in their entirety. If competition defined the operational logic of studio producers, the same could not be said of these technocrat-producers whose work method involved pooling their know-hows in periodic round-table discussions involving leading cultural critics, filmmakers, and government officials. One of the recurring agendas was how they might counter what they saw as Japan’s “image problem” in the West, notably in the US. Especially after the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War, the Chinese Nationalist Party’s effective PR campaign in the US loomed large in these discussions as a motivating factor for searching for creative means to court the US public. Recruitment of American intermediaries emerged as one such means.
Paraphrasing art critic Itagaki Takao’s succinct analysis, it was understood that “government-sponsored events [were] enough to attract the intellectual upper-class,” but that “an [American] agent was essential in order to reach the more common people.” The most frequently cited example of such an “agent” was James A. Fitzpatrick, an independent travelogue producer and narrator whose *Traveltalks: The Voice of the Globe* (1930-1955, USA) was screened in MGM theaters across the United States. Fitzpatrick was among the first to take full advantage of the Japanese Government Railways’ 1929 revision of internal rules to make available its library of travelogue films to domestic and overseas film producers. If, as Jeffrey Ruoff notes, “Fitzpatrick’s travelogues provided a stock set of images and concepts about the world abroad at a time when hardly any international films were available to American audiences,” it is crucial to note that, from the Japanese technocratic vantage point, they also offered an ideal solution for “advertising Japanese landscapes on an unprecedented scale.”

Fitzpatrick, who produced a Technicolor update in 1935 with BTI’s assistance, might have been the technocrat-producers’ favorite American “agent,” but he was hardly alone. As late as August 1940, the Society of International Cultural Relations’ flagship magazine, *Kokusai Bunka*, proudly wrote of their success in recruiting James R. Brill of ERPI Classroom Film (predecessor to Encyclopedia Britannica Classroom Film), to edit *School Days in Japan* (*Nihon no shogakko*), and enlisting Lowell Thomas, the renowned Fox Movietone narrator and radio and television host, for the English narration.

Seen in this technocratic milieu that valorized successful recruitment of cross-Pacific partners, it becomes less important to nail down the specific occasion for which BTI’s *Tokyo-Peking* or Mantetsu’s *JKMT: Manchuria* were produced than to expand our understanding of “virtual contact zones” beyond the space of screening to include the various processes of the films’ production and circulation.

By taking a serial analysis approach, we can better articulate a certain view of the world that the American narrators actually held in common with the Japanese technocrat-producers. We can call this, quite simply, the “view,” borrowing Tom Gunning’s term for the aesthetic that was dominant in early nonfiction film (from 1906 to WWI). Instead of narrative identification, the view aesthetic centered on the “mimesis of the act of observing,” or a self-reflexive interest in sights and seeing. As Gunning observes in relation to his better-known concept the “cinema of attractions”—the idea that early cinema (prior to 1906) emphasized “the act of display and the satisfying of visual curiosity”—it is easy to see that the view aesthetic does not disappear after WWI but “goes underground” in certain niche fields such as
educational, industrial, and state-sponsored travelogues. We can see the resilience of the view aesthetic in travelogue films (and of the serial nature of the travelogue genre) in the number of travelogue titles bearing the word “glimpses” that were exhibited at different national pavilions across the New York World’s Fair of 1939: *Glimpses of Switzerland*, *Glimpses of Belgium*, *Glimpses of South Australia*, and *Glimpses of Japan*. The prevalence of the view aesthetic on the eve of WWII should alert us to the fact that its ability to transcend ideological divides was not a reflection of the supposed universality or political neutrality. As Alicia Volk observes in a related context, imperial Japan’s state-sponsored travelogues “projected the image of Japan as Asia’s gate-keeper and also, as the guardian of China’s ‘Open Door,’ its guarantor of peace and prosperity,” and it was the travelogues’ function to provide the views as evidence of the “Open Door.” By the same token, we can return to the Mantetsu film, *JKMT: Manchuria*, to reframe the abrupt invocation of a ticklish, embodied spectator as the American collaborator’s passive (and ultimately stifled) expression of dissent against the regime of view aesthetics.

To conclude, existing scholarship on the travelogues produced by Mantetsu, BTI, and KBS, has tended to emphasize the work of demystifying the view upheld by the films so that we, as critical viewers looking back form a historical distance, can recognize the exoticized images of Koreans in ethnic clothes in the border town of Tumen as part of imperial Japan’s fantastic imaginary of Manchukuo as a multiethnic utopia, or see the benign interior shots of the new luxury high-speed train, Asia Express, and call out the conspicuous absence of armed guards (and the whitewashing of Chinese resistance against the Japanese invasion of China). Even though the importance of the work of demystification cannot be emphasized enough, it is equally meaningful to keep in mind that the guiding aesthetic of the travelogue genre was, after all, the view and not persuasion, and the inter-imperial appeal of the travelogue genre rested on visual pleasures rather than context-specific readings. Similarly, it is important to clarify that, according to the Japanese technocrats’ logic, it was not necessary to win over Fitzpatrick, Brill, or Thomas on an ideological level, for they could rely on the trans-ideological appeal of the view. It is not surprising then that when the blacklist of pro-Japanese American “propagandists” on Japanese payroll started to circulate in the US in the late 1930s—as the news of Japan’s attack on Shanghai and Nanjing aggravated the already-strained Japan-US relation—the list spared the Americans who were involved in disseminating Japanese state-sponsored travelogue films. Like the authors of these stories
of pro-Japanese propagandists who never doubted that it was money, not ideology, that corrupted American intellectuals to collaborate with the Japanese agents, this paper argued for the importance of recognizing the cross-Pacific, inter-imperial, trans-ideological appeal of the view aesthetic as the master signifier of the consumer-capitalist ideology that maintains that the world ought to be kept “open” for spectator-travelers.

Notes

5 I have opted for a more literal translation of the Japanese title (the surviving print with the English narration is missing the title card) instead of cultural historian Jie Li’s A Grand Tour of Manchuria and Inner Korea, since the term “a grand tour” evokes the Victorian tradition that neither the Japanese title nor the work refers to, and the “Inner Korea” is a mistranslation of nai-sen which should be understood as inner territory (i.e., mainland Japan) and colonial Korea. Jie Li, “Phantasmagoric Manchukuo: Documentaries Produced by the South Manchurian Railway Company, 1932–1940,” Positions 22, no. 2 (2014): 342.
6 Guo Yuan’s scholarship has made significant contributions toward making imperial Japan’s tourism the popular field of inquiry that it is today both in Japanese and Anglophone academia. In this recent article, he identifies “kanko eiga” (literally, “tourism film” but interchangeably used with travelogue) as the most important genre in which Mantetsu’s Film Unit operated. According to Guo, one of the ideological functions of the film was, at least in the context of Japanese reception, countering the media’s portrayal of Manchuria as a dangerous frontier which was renewed with an attack on a touring Japanese school group in August 1934. Guo

7 Two entries in the censorship record date the completion of the English version (appears as *Manshū no tabi*) variously to 20 January or 1 March, 1939. Naimushō keihokyoku, *Firumu ken'etsu jihō: Furoku no bu* (1939): 34, 100.

8 Ibid.


10 See Yamamoto 2012, 34.

11 Because the New York World’s Fair was positioned as a showcase for PR films in standard and small-gauge formats, the organizers compiled a thorough survey listing all the titles screened during the fair (30 April to 31 October 1939). Three films are listed as “travelogue” shown outdoors in Japanese Pavilion’s garden: *Glimpse of Japan*, *Melodies of Japan*, and *Symphonic Sketch of Tokio*. The Newsreel and Film Department, “Films Exhibited at the New York World’s Fair 1939, A Survey.” (3 February 1940) in the Manuscripts, Archives, and Rare Books Division at the New York Public Library, Box 398, Folder 10, 26.

12 Even though Yamamoto Sae’s informative study of the Japanese exhibits at the two expos takes for granted that *Tokyo-Peking* was screened in New York, there is no evidence that it was shown in the Japanese Pavilion. Ibid. By contrast, a small article exists for a free public screening held at the Golden Gate International Expo in the summer of 1940, although this was after the expo site reopened to the public. See “Exposition Program,” *Oakland Tribune*, 8 July 1940.

13 See for instance, “Sen-man-shi no tabi kanko eiga chikaku kansei,” *Asahi Shimbun*, 29 December 1938, which emphasizes BTI’s decision to relegate editing decisions to an American editor. We can assume that BTI, not Mantetsu, was in the driver’s seat from the fact that the English version of Mantetsu’s travelogue is virtually unchanged from the Japanese original whereas there was no Japanese original for BTI’s *Tokyo-Peking* (even the segments that resemble Kamei Fumio’s *Peking* are “outtakes” not used in Kamei’s film).


15 The benefits and limitations of considering Mantetsu films in the auteurist model, as Okada Hidenori does in his reading of the filmmaker Akutagawa Kozo, have been obliquely addressed in Jie Li’s emphasis on the films’ white-collar technocratic spectatorship. A fuller discussion is needed to synthesize the auteurist and the spectator-oriented frameworks to start considering key players in the industrial world as technocratic visionaries who spoke of their profession using the language of mass communication rather than artistic creation, often boasting their ability to organize the films as stock footages making up a “film library” serving the growing news industry. See Okada Hidenori, “Nihon no dokyumentari no sōdana jikkenjō” (The Great Laboratory of Japanese Documentary), in *Mantetsu to wa nandatta no ka* (What Was Mantetsu) (Tokyo: Fujiwara shoten, 2006), 238-241; and Li 2014, 330-331.

16 See the roundtable discussion “Kankō Eiga to Yushutsu Eiga o kataru” (Discussing
Tourism Film and Export Film), *Eiga hyōron* (August 1939), 69.

17 The second quote is from the chief of newly formed BTI cited in *Asahi Shimbun*, 15 May 1930. Murao Kaoru, who oversaw film production at JGR identifies the four films Fitzpatrick brought back with him as *Sakura saku nihon* (To Cherry Blooming Japan), *Fuji goko* (Five Fuji Lakes), *Shirouma-dake* (Mt. Shirouma), and *Tenryūgawa* (Tenryu River). See Murao Kaoru, “Gaikyaku yūchi no tame no senden-eiga,” *Tourist* 7 (July 10). See also Ruoff 2006, 13.


22 Both examples are from Guo 2019, 56, but a similar strategy of denaturalizing the views is evident in Li 2014, 342-345.

23 See, for instance, “Japan’s Propaganda,” *The Pittsburgh Press*, 30 April 1939. The exemption of Thomas is understandable given that the majority of his assignments were with Fox Movietone which typically took a hard line against the Japanese invasion of China.

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