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RESEARCH PROPOSAL

“What is the relationship between cinematic discourses of national identity in Japan and in Russia and overall bilateral relations between the two countries?”

Since their earliest encounters in Northeast Asia, Russia and Japan have been rivals for territory and influence.¹ In the modern era, popular memory of hostility and mutual mistrust between the states begins with the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05. It is at approximately this same time that cinema emerges as a new popular entertainment and art form. This coincidence is notable for the fact that the Russo-Japanese War was the initial impetus for the growth of the film industry in Japan.² It is significant because the economic imperatives of production, system of distribution, and unprecedented realism in representation combined to make cinema a powerful means for communicating values and ideas to a mass culture.³

States with wealth and technology to produce films quickly recognized the impact that this medium could have in reinforcing or subverting national goals and self-perceptions. Policy responses by the state in Russia (Imperial and Soviet) and in Japan in the first half of the century differed in approach, but the underlying purpose of controlling political discourse and representation of social norms for the masses was consistent. While the ideological bias of Japanese state supervision of the film industry changed radically during the American occupation with regard to Japanese national identity, its orientation toward Soviet Russia remained consistently negative.⁴ Ideological factors offer one explanation for the apparent scarcity of direct exchange commercially or artistically between Japanese and Russian cinemas.

RELEVANCE OF THE QUESTION

Now that the ideological divides of the Cold War have ostensibly faded into support for the spread of free market democracy, what are the remaining borders to building understanding through cross-cultural exchange of mass media products? The separation of politics from economics and the use of a “multi-layered” approach⁵ by Japan in bilateral relations have failed to generate substantial progress toward a resolution of abnormality. As policymakers consider long term alternatives for eroding Japanese mistrust of Russia and Russian apathy toward Japanese territorial claims, changing mass perceptions across cultures seems an important policy objective. Arguably, increased direct people to people exchanges would be one desirable adjustment; however, the realities of geography and population size, as well as the self-selecting tendencies of

¹ Buszynski, p.11-16.

² Komatsu, p.177.

³ Hoskins, MacFadyen, and Finn in Global Television and Film provide a conceptual framework for examining commercial dimensions of the film industry in an economic context. See also May, p.vi-xv.

⁴ Hirano, p.241-257.

⁵ Akaha, “The Russian Far East in Russo-Japanese Relations,” p.14.

participants in international exchange fora, limit the possible effective scope of such efforts.

With conventional strategies to accomplish an increase in amicable political and economic state-to-state relations seemingly ineffective, a comparison of the culturally significant content of Russian and Japanese cinemas and of their commercial development offers an alternative level of analysis where more traditional methods fail. Cinema as a “cultural product”⁶ is of particular interest for two reasons. Studies of cultural production in the past century seem to reveal no correlation between cultural affinity and a change in policy toward the other nation. The literature suggests, however, that exchanges of ideas have primarily taken place in scholarly and artistic dialogues about literature or philosophy.⁷ Cultural affinity has, therefore, been limited to the intellectual elite of each nation. Exploration of common values has failed to influence either popular understanding or outstanding individual actors or groups in the policymaking elite. It is reasonable to conjecture, however, that thematic resonances forming the basis for appreciation of another country’s culture among one group may also be understood by a mass audience if presented in an appropriate vehicle. While not advocating attempts at indoctrination or didactic cross-cultural education (there is, in fact, recent precedent for the failure of this approach),⁸ closer identification with the “other” may be achieved indirectly through greater exposure to entertainments well-marketed across borders, in spite of any cultural discounts.⁹

The second reason for studying the historical development of film industries in Russia and in Japan is to consider organizational compatibilities in a non-traditional industry. Whether considering distribution systems for film products as joint-consumption goods (i.e., a relatively low-cost and low-risk product to trade),¹⁰ or the regional ambitions of the Russian Far East and provincial Japan to develop new income sources, the film industry may offer a joint-venture potential different from other industries. Discovering a basis for creating economic ties between countries in a cultural industry, or identifying strategic obstacles to such a liaison, is an enticing prospect.

THE STATE OF KNOWLEDGE

The literature offers little precedent in English for directly examining the history of cinematic discourse in Russia and in Japan with regard to bilateral relations or otherwise. The direction is suggested, rather, by diverse scholarship examining: the enduring stalemate of abnormal relations between Japan and Russia (as exemplified by their territorial dispute); the history of cultural exchanges between them and mindsets within them; the theoretical and historical basis for differentiating cinema as an industrial process and a mode of cultural production with comparatively high political significance.

⁶ This term is used with reference to a definition of cultural industries by Sinclair cited in Hoskins et al., *Global* as “those which produce goods or services which are . . . somehow expressive of the way of life of a society” and “offer the terms and symbols with which we think and communicate about patterns of social difference, the aspiration of groups for recognition and identity, the affirmation and challenging of social values and ideals, and the experience of social change.” (p.3).

⁷ See the State of Knowledge section below for specific attribution.

⁸ Rozman, p.46.

⁹ See Hoskins et al. *Global*, p. 27-36 for an explanation of the “cultural discount” concept.

¹⁰ Hoskins et al. *Global*, p.4.

Demonstrating the utility of removing self-evident feedback loops in analysis of bilateral relations, Akaha discusses the territorial dispute as symptomatic not causal of failed efforts at normalization and uses it as a departure point for exploring political and economic causes for stagnation.¹¹ Stephan provides useful perspective on the history of conflict between Imperial Russian and early Soviet forces and Imperial Japan in the Russian Far East in the first quarter of the century.¹² Hasegawa's two volume study of the territorial dispute provides a long historical view of bilateral political relations against which other patterns of interaction may be assessed.

Among volumes that discuss culture as a variable in bilateral relations, literary exchange is most often cited as an example of cultural affinity having had little influence on policy or political will.¹³ While the cause of this failure is acknowledged as the limited exposure of popular audiences to cultural products, little attention is given to the history or possibility of a mass-oriented cultural exchange. Swinton examines Russo-Japanese War tryptichs as examples of a popular art form contributing within Japan to mass understanding of history and consolidation of national character. This research is insightful in differentiating the gulf between popular culture and intellectual expression, but examines a medium at the end of its popular relevance.¹⁴

Black et al. place cinema briefly in the context of a comparative study of modernization in Japan and Russia, contributing the observation that both countries were indebted to the West technically and artistically in their early adoption of this industrial process of mass communication.¹⁵ Wilson and Wells note the shared enthusiasm for films depicting actual and fictionalized scenes from the Russo-Japanese War in the two countries, as well as other parts of the world.¹⁶ Richie, in his cited works, incorporates the importance of expressing Japanese national identity in cinema as a foundation for his critical history. Basic reference to the theoretical writings and thematic content of the films of Eisenstein and Vertov, among many others, affirm the ideological importance attached to cinema in Soviet Russia from its first great wave of production. Shlapentokh and Leyda elaborate on the intersection of ideology, cultural, and national identity in the film industry.

METHODOLOGY, PLANNED ORGANIZATION, AND EXPECTED FINDINGS

This research will be conducted primarily as a literature review (predominantly of sources originally in English or available in translation) across the disciplines of traditional international relations analysis, intellectual and cultural history, film theory, and sociology. Some reference will be made to original films, as case illustrations, where appropriate. Additionally, if film industry economic data are insufficient in tertiary sources, trade journals and other statistical sources (e.g., OECD reports) will be consulted when available and reliable. Data from any of these sources may be aggregated to

¹¹ "The Russian Far East in Russo-Japanese Relations," p.13-18.

¹² p. 76-155.

¹³ Akaha, "Distant Neighbors," p. 10-11; Rozman, p.46; Swinton, p.115.

¹⁴ "The Russo-Japanese War prints were the last woodblock prints produced in Japan as a commercial and popular medium." p. 117.

¹⁵ p.222-224 and p.327-328.

¹⁶ p.15.

examine trends in commercial exchange in the film industry relative to more general economic trends or to historical events as representative of bilateral political relations, or an operationalized index representing bilateral relations.

This paper will begin by distinguishing filmmaking as a mode of cultural production distinct from other arts and other forms of mass communication. After briefly establishing the significance of the unique theoretical and material properties of cinema in the twentieth century, a comparison surveying cinematic production in Russia and in Japan will be undertaken in three sections. The divisions will be based on historically notable events with the expectation that these periods will be useful as guides to identifying shifts in the function and discourse of cinema in the two countries. Within each period, film production will be examined in terms of three concepts: content, commerce, and context. Content (including popular and critical reception) will consist of a critical evaluation of individual film texts or film genres in each country to understand the function of those products in the formation and discussion of national identity. Particular emphasis will be given to cases in which national character is articulated vis-à-vis the figure of the *other* conceived in terms of the second culture. Commerce will add depth to patterns of textual interaction by examining data about the state of the film market and cross-cultural trade (bilateral and international). This data will also serve as a rudimentary metric for assessing popular access in each country to the cultural products of the other, as well as the domestic reception of film products by the general population. Context will be an attempt to integrate the other two levels of analysis into the broadest framework of Russo-Japanese bilateral relations by evaluating the ideological, social, and political forces that may have influenced the creation, reception, and distribution of films.

Conclusions will be drawn regarding patterns in interaction conceived in two ways. First, directly addressing the research question, the data will be examined to test the null hypothesis that there is no significant correlation between cinematic discourses of national identity in Japan and in Russia and the overall state of bilateral relations. It is expected that this null hypothesis will be rejected; however, regardless of the outcome, cinematic national identity discourse will then be considered separately as a dependent variable. Independent variables will be sought to explain discernable patterns in the film industries of both countries.

This organization is employed to avoid the unproductive pitfalls of discussing a “chicken-egg” feedback loop between cinematic discourse and bilateral relations or, alternatively, being burdened with the task of positively associating cinema as an independent variable with bilateral relations as its dependent. While that assumption underlies the posited relevance of this culturally oriented research to policymakers, it is beyond the ambition of this study to establish cause and effect. The unique properties of film as a cultural product frame the research to suggest that causal inferences may reasonably be made by rejecting a lack of correlation between the two variables. Identifying other factors that have affected the production and reception of films across borders in these two countries provides a starting point for a more detailed examination of public policy options in areas such as trade, joint production ventures, and cross-cultural marketing.

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