

Article

Gendering the Japanese Empire: Ri Kōran as ‘Transnational’ Star?

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Abstract: This paper aims to assess how Ri Kōran came to represent the gender dichotomies of the Japanese Empire. Looking at two propaganda films, *Suzhou Nights* (1941) and *Sayon's Bell* (1943), I will work out how the roles she played are indicative of the gender roles in the Japanese Empire, taking into account her transnational star persona.

Keywords: Ri Koran; Li Xianglan; Yamaguchi Yoshiko; transnationality; Japanese Empire; propaganda films

1. Introduction

Ri Kōran¹ was the Chinese stage name of the Japanese actress Yamaguchi Yoshiko. She was born in 1920 in Manchuria to Japanese settlers and had grown up between Japan and China. Her Chinese name comes from her ‘adoption’ into the family of a friend of her father’s, as is custom among close friends in China (Yamaguchi and Fujiwara 1987, 2015).² Not only did her background and upbringing lead to her being fluent in Chinese, but, having attended a Chinese girls’ school, she was also culturally versed enough to blend in with other Chinese. She was able to traverse boundaries between China, Japan and Manchuria and their languages and cultures. What makes her story special in comparison to many other Japanese in Manchuria in a similar situation at the same time, is that her ‘difference’ was publicly exploited for the sake of the Japanese Empire and she became one of the most visible stars of its propaganda machine, playing not just Chinese characters, but also Russian, Mongolian and Korean colonial subjects (Baskett 2008). As Chia-Ning Chang points out in the introduction to his translation of Yamaguchi’s autobiography, while other such stars have faded away, “[...] Li/Yamaguchi still seems to retain a peculiar allure to audiences in China, Japan, Hong Kong, and Southeast Asia” (Chang 2015, Kindle loc. 229). However, this “allure” is insolubly tied to her gender and the gender politics of the time; posing as a Chinese *woman*, her characters were trapped in an inferior position to her *male*, Japanese, counterparts. In that sense, as stars are symbols of something else and, as such, connoted to certain attitudes and desires (Dyer 1998), the creation of the star persona of ‘Ri Kōran’ embodies the hierarchies of the Japanese Empire. Baskett supports this notion, “In her many incarnations, Ri Koran was a powerful tool of propaganda that brought disturbing new life to Japanese Pan-Asianist slogans, for in no uncertain terms she promised the fulfillment of the catchphrase ‘Asia is one’” (Baskett 2008, p. 78).

Although she herself claims never to have kept her Japanese nationality secret (Yamaguchi and Fujiwara 1987, 2015), she did little to clarify it either (Tamura 2007). That she was not ethnically Chinese

¹ The Chinese reading of her name is Li Xianglan. Ri Kōran is the Japanese reading of the same characters. Throughout the Sinophone world, she is known by the Chinese reading only.

² The author of the article would like to thank the various anonymous reviewers for their invaluable feedback.

was not public knowledge at the time. As Stephenson writes, Ri was often carefully kept apart from her fans, so as to not destroy the myths surrounding her star persona, leaving only her “traces” to be found everywhere (Stephenson 1999). This illusion of Ri Kōran could therefore hold many identities and none, gaining life according to the desires of the audience. As Chang (Kindle loc. 444–454) asserts, it was essential to maintain this appearance, “So long as the vague suspicions about Yamaguchi’s true ethnic origin did not erupt into a national scandal or an international firestorm, the enhanced murkiness of Yamaguchi’s identity served only to accentuate her personal mystique and her legend as a transnational star” (Baskett 2008). However, her transnational stardom is tied to the experience of Japanese imperialism across Asia and predominantly signifies Japanese imperialism above anything else. It is important to remember, in this context, that filmmaking was highly regulated in Japan at the time, with strict censorship preventing potentially undesirable messages. Considering that, at the time, media and communication theorists around the world were actively discussing the influence of the mass media and their ability to guide the masses, it comes as no surprise that, already, in 1938, before Ri Kōran’s rise to stardom, the Censorship Division of the Home Ministry in Japan issued guidelines as to what films should be shown and, according to High, they included:

(1) celebrations of the ‘Japanese spirit’ as seen in the family system and of the national spirit of self-sacrifice; (2) use of film to re-educate the masses, especially young people and women, whose Westernization has caused them to reject traditional values; [. . .] (4) imbuing respect for fathers and elder brothers; (5) suppression of ‘the tendency toward individualism inspired by European and American films’. (High 2003, p. 292)

The media was thus actively used in order to stir national sentiment, particularly as the war dragged on, contributing greatly to what Louise Young terms “war fever” (Young 1998, p. 55). Using the term propaganda in this (Lasswell 1927, p. 627) sense, as a means “to reaffirm or redefine attitudes”, as outlined above (Lasswell 1927), films at the time were used to visualize such desirable attitudes, and Ri Kōran’s films were no exception.

Therefore, it seems as if Ri Kōran’s persistence in the history of Japanese film is also tied to her gender, and not just the roles she played and the songs she sung. As the Japanese Empire was indeed strongly gendered, a female star as an embodiment of Japan’s colonial subjects correlates perfectly to the politics of the time. As an assessment of her role in Japanese imperial propaganda cannot be made without looking at the films she starred in (not just her star persona), I will do a close reading of two of the films she made in collaboration with the Japanese film studio Shōchiku. The films to be analyzed are *Suzhou Nights* (Sōshū no yoru, dir. Nomura Hiromasa, Shōchiku 1941) and *Sayon’s Bell* (Sayon no kane, dir. Shimizu Hiroshi, Shōchiku 1943), with emphasis on the latter film, as it has often been overlooked.³ Prior to the film analysis, I will briefly introduce how gender politics underpinned the creation of the Japanese Empire. Overall, I will attempt to answer the question to what extent Ri Kōran’s status as ‘transnational star’ correlated with those gender politics.

2. Gendering the Empire

The Japanese Empire was based on imagined family ties. Influenced by the Neo-Confucian writings of the Mito School of the late Edo Period, in particular those of Aizawa Seishisai (1782–1863), the state was envisaged along Confucian family ideals (Beasley 1990). Within these ideals, male stands over female, elder over younger, and servitude is demanded towards the more senior members. The national polity (*kokutai*) at the time mimicked on the macrolevel what was supposedly present on the microlevel. Within Japan, the Emperor was the father of all Japanese, who were all brothers, some more senior than others, turning Japan into a family state. During the colonial expansion,

³ I will disregard its actual success at the box office at the time; however, both films have been released on videotape and DVD, suggesting a more lasting impact than their short-term success (or lack thereof) at the time. Furthermore, both films have been chosen because of the discourses they speak to, rather than their potential success.

the colonized people also had to be included in this polity, and, often, this meant that they had to undertake compulsory emperor worship and follow Shinto rites (*ibid.*). Furthermore, incorporating them into the national polity of the family state meant turning them into younger siblings of the male-connoted Japanese state, thus giving Japan the superior position of elder male to whom all need to answer.

The notion of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, which was announced for the first time in August 1940 by the then foreign Minister Matsuoka Yōsuke (Beasley 1990), can be seen as the underpinning principle of the Japanese colonial empire. In a sense, the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere also spoke to imagined family relations, albeit less overtly. All of Asia was to ‘prosper’ under Japanese guidance, putting Japan in the superior position. Within this framework, China was often seen as a woman and not given the more powerful position of a younger male. In that worldview, as the historian Yamaji Aizan pointed out in 1917, China may once have been pretty, but was now worn out, like an ‘old prostitute’ (High 2003). This coding of China as an ‘old prostitute’ speaks to Young’s notion of colonial desire, whereby the Other is sexually loose and has different, more dangerous, moral standards than the colonizer (Young 1995). The colonial Other can present a danger to the colonizer, but at the same time holds a fascination for them. Additionally, not only was China female-connoted and thus, in the Confucian order of society, inferior, Japan also saw China as its own Orient, as a vision of its own past from which it had evolved (Tanaka 1993). It therefore put itself in a similar position to the one the Western imperialist powers saw themselves in, as civilized and civilizer. Accordingly, records of the time saw China perennially as inferior, less developed and dirty, fostering a sense of superiority in the Japanese (*ibid.*). Like any other imperial power, Japan used its *mission civilisatrice* as an excuse for its military exploits, and the stereotypes and preconceptions of China as inferior became prevalent among the Japanese. Even Yamaguchi Yoshiko herself speaks of having been verbally abused as ‘Chinese’ during her visits to Japan, mainly because she spoke both languages fluently (Yamaguchi and Fujiwara 1987, 2015) and thus could not be placed clearly into the ethnical hierarchies of the time.⁴

It is against this backdrop that both Ri Kōran’s films and her career must be seen. Therefore, a Japanese woman, particularly one as young as Yamaguchi (she was, after all, merely eighteen years old when she commenced her career), was ideal for the male Japanese producers, as the reservations that any Chinese national may have had, did not need to be overcome.⁵ In a studio system that did not usually grant a voice to actors, Yamaguchi would have been the last person to have been given a choice of scripts, nor was she in control of her own star persona. Ri Kōran thus remains a signifier that has been filled with life in the male-dominated Japanese sphere of influence.

3. Gender in *Suzhou Nights* and *Sayon’s Bell*

The films that catapulted Ri Kōran to stardom were produced by the Manchurian film company Man’ei. Man’ei, was a joint venture between the photographic unit of the Manchurian Railway Company and the Manchurian government. While Japanese censorship may not have applied in the same way, Man’ei was set up in an attempt to promote the principle of the Manchurian state, *gozoku kyōwa* (Harmony of the Five Races), and, thereby, the ‘benefits’ of a Japanese presence on the Asian continent to a wider audience. Yamaguchi Yoshiko, as Ri Kōran, was ideal for that purpose, given that her transnational background already embodied that principle. Or, as Chang puts it, “she came to represent a meticulously handcrafted cultural construct programmed to help materialize the subordination, or at least the acquiescence, of those living under Japanese military or de facto control” (Chang 2015, Kindle loc. 285).

⁴ Discrimination notwithstanding, Ri Kōran also had a devout fan following in Japan, with people almost rioting to get tickets for her concerts (Stephenson 1999).

⁵ Baskett speaks of the refusal of experienced Chinese actors to collaborate with the Japanese for fear of being branded as traitors (Baskett 2008).

Ri Kōran joined Man'ei in 1938 and, in her autobiography, she makes it sound like it was a decision made over her head, stumbling into her career rather than actively pursuing it (Yamaguchi and Fujiwara 1987, 2015). While the first films she made with Man'ei cannot necessarily be called blatant propaganda films, the continental trilogy she subsequently shot with Hasegawa Kazuo as her co-star and in collaboration with the Japanese studio Tōhō were much more so. In each of the three films, *Song of the White Orchid* (*Byakuran no uta*, dir. Watanabe Kunio, 1939), *China Nights* (*Shina no yoru*, dir. by Fushimizu Osamu, 1940), and *Vow in the Desert* (*Nessa no chikai*, dir. Watanabe Kunio, 1940), Ri Kōran was cast as Chinese women who harbour reservations against the Japanese. Employing motifs reminiscent of William Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*, all of her characters do, after some misunderstandings and with a good effort on the side of the Japanese, see 'reason' (i.e., fall in love with the Japanese man), making a less hostile encounter possible not just for the couple, but also, more symbolically, for a Sino-Japanese 'friendship' (Baskett 2008; Chang 2015; High 2003). Yamaguchi herself states, "All the films in the continental trilogy were mundane melodramas; moreover, they were also propaganda tools in the service of Japan's continental policy" (Yamaguchi and Fujiwara 2015, Kindle loc. 2857).

Although *Suzhou Nights* (*Sōshū no yoru*, 1941) is not part of the continental trilogy, and was made by Tōhō's competitor Shōchiku, its plot is very similar and seems to have been intended to cash in on the success of its predecessors. However, it has not received as much attention as the continental trilogy, even though it is as overtly propagandistic as the others.⁶ Ri Kōran plays Meilan, a young woman who works in an orphanage in Shanghai, where a lot of children live who have been displaced by the war. She is rude and hot-headed, insulting the Japanese at every possible instant, hating them for having brought misery upon the Chinese. Her Japanese co-star is Sano Shūji, who plays a Japanese doctor named Kanō. Kanō selflessly saves a Chinese child in Meilan's care twice from certain death. Through his kindness and bravery, he earns Meilan's respect. Like the films in the continental trilogy, *Suzhou Nights* is a story of a taming of the shrew, and again the 'shrew' will fall in love with the Japanese man. *Suzhou Nights* differs from the other films, because there is no happy ending for their love story. Meilan is betrothed to a childhood friend. As she unhappily looks to the future, Kanō leaves Shanghai to go further into China.

This film is symbolic on several levels. Not only does Kanō go deeper into China, thus symbolizing and justifying the continuing invasion of China, but Meilan and Kanō again represent a stubborn China and a benevolent Japan. Meilan needs to be brought to reason and accept Japanese (male) dominance. Thus, the same gender tropes apply as in the continental trilogy. Once she has been convinced, Kanō is free to go, to convince other Chinese of the true intentions of the Japanese. Tellingly, the Japanese are all represented by men, and most of them are doctors, not soldiers, thereby clearly fulfilling a humanistic mission in China (and on screen). By contrast, most Chinese characters are either female or children and therefore, under Neo-Confucian ideals, more easily dominated. The one Chinese man of note, Meilan's future husband, is a criminal, as he unsuccessfully tries to murder Kanō. In another act of selflessness, Kanō forgives him, turning even an attempt on his life into a misunderstanding that merely needs to be overcome by benevolence. Yet, Meilan's initial hatred is not shown as being entirely unfounded, as the film does refer to the war that is raging in China—after all, some of the children are war orphans. Meilan's change of heart is thus symbolic in the context of the Japanese expansion in China. The propagandistic message of the film thus seems to be that, if all Chinese just acknowledged the true civilizing mission of the Japanese, the war would not be necessary.

The other Shōchiku film, *Sayon's Bell* (*Sayon no kane*, 1943) takes a different approach to convey its imperialistic message. Unlike *Suzhou Nights*, there is no love story at the heart of the film, and it is not so much about getting the colonial subjects to accept the dominance of the Japanese, but to show how they have already accepted it. Yomota asserts that *Sayon's Bell* belongs to the "films based on the

⁶ For a discussion of this film, see also (Kirsch 2015).

kōminka seisaku (measures to turn the colonized people into imperial subjects)” (Yomota 2001a, p. 9, italics, translation and insertion mine). Hong supports that notion, and, furthermore, elucidates the history of the film: *Sayon's Bell* is based on a true story. However, that does not necessarily mean that the story of the film itself is true (Hong 2004). In 1938, a young aboriginal girl named Sayon fell into a river and vanished. This simple news item may, in itself, not necessarily seem noteworthy, were it not for the fact that it developed a life of its own and became akin to an ‘urban myth’ in colonial Taiwan. The various manifestations of the story that subsequently followed turned the unfortunate girl into a heroine, who died while protecting a Japanese flag (ibid.). The story became so popular that a film version of it was merely a logical conclusion, and it was described as a “heart-warming story of barbarians” intermingled with a “story of patriotism” (Nihon eiga nenkan 1943, cited from Hong 2004, p. 193, translation mine). Hence, the film shows the Taiwanese not just as obedient imperial subjects, but also as exotic people living in paradise (Hong 2004), who are, nonetheless, nothing but barbarians compared to the superior Japanese.⁷ In the opening sequence, which is eight minutes and twenty seconds long, we see Taiwanese aboriginals in their traditional clothing, working diligently for the benefit of the Japanese Empire. The musical score is upbeat, while the captions on screen introduce them as the ‘Takasago’⁸ and describe their efforts for the Japanese Empire. Apart from the Taiwanese aboriginals who volunteered as soldiers, that are shown towards the end of those eight minutes, all of them wear traditional clothing making them visually different to the Japanese. At the same time, this also turns them into exotic, not-so-civilized Others, in line with how the film was promoted. Perhaps unwillingly, the film also shows the contradictions that the propaganda machine of the Japanese Empire was capable of, and that persisted in any colonial Empire. In highlighting the successes of the ‘taming of the barbarians’ (by letting them speak Japanese and fight for the Empire), they nonetheless need to remain ‘exotic barbarians’ in order to justify the continued colonisation, turning the Taiwanese into civilized, yet uncivilized at the same time. The exoticism of the opening sequence, and of the film as a whole, is underlined by the promotion material of the time, which has been reproduced in the volume *Ri Kōran to higashi ajia* (Yomota 2001b). While the monochrome film itself is unable to show the colourfulness of the traditional Taiwanese garb, the promotional material was in colour, enhancing the sense of exoticism where the film technologically failed.

Ri Kōran plays Sayon, the doomed Taiwanese aboriginal girl. While, in all her other films, she portrays a strong-willed woman (who is then nonetheless happy to change her mind when ‘prompted’), Sayon is simple, naïve and good-natured. Her greatest goal is to raise as many pigs as possible to provide as much food as possible for the Japanese Army and, therefore, to contribute to the war effort. The film’s opening sequence is again significant in that respect, as it also shows the Taiwanese aboriginals fulfilling their duties as Japanese subjects by indeed planting seeds to ‘feed the soldiers’ and raising the Japanese flag while paying respects to the Emperor. As this film was made in 1943, when victory seemed to become ever more distant, the war effort is represented as joint act, all family members of the Empire pulling together.

Altogether, only a few Japanese characters (mainly the governor of the region and a few soldiers) appear in the film, and the Taiwanese aboriginal men are quasi-Japanized in their place. Everybody speaks Japanese on screen and there are no villains. The Taiwanese characters’ fluency in Japanese and the use of Japanese names for the Taiwanese men are in line with colonial policy of the time, although it is an unrealistic representation, as few Taiwanese would have spoken Japanese so eloquently and used Japanese names even among themselves (Hong 2004). Interestingly, only the Taiwanese men have taken Japanese names and are being addressed as such. The women still have Chinese names, which underlines their difference and makes them inferior not only to the Japanese, but also to the male members of their ethnic group. This is also underlined by Sayon’s simple nature.

⁷ That the reality of colonial life in Japan was different goes without saying. Ching (2001) provides a good overview over the ‘Japanisation’ of Taiwan.

⁸ Takasago was a catch-all Japanese term to refer to various indigenous ethnic groups in Taiwan.

Unlike the Chinese, hot-headed girls that had become somewhat like Ri Kōran's trademark in the continental trilogy and *Suzhou Nights*, Sayon, the Taiwanese aboriginal girl, does not need convincing and harbours no ill-will against her masters. She willingly accepts being dominated by her fellow tribesmen, as well as the Japanese. Sayon seems incapable of any defiance, so the only time that she does defy male advice, it ends in tragedy. When the men in her village volunteer for the war and she wants to send them off, she drowns in a river that a violent storm has turned into a raging stream. She had been warned not to follow them, symbolising that disobedience leads to certain death.

Hong (2004, p. 198) elucidates that Sayon's character represents 'nature', and one could extend that to all female characters on screen, not just Sayon (for whom it is just more evident). All Taiwanese aboriginal women nurture, care, look after the fields and animals and represent, in a sense, nature. By contrast, the Taiwanese men appear 'cultured'. Not only are they more educated and speak Japanese at a higher level than the women, but they have already attained a higher level of cultivation, namely a Japanese name. Only the Japanese men themselves appear even more cultured, as they are the only ones living in solid houses rather than huts and have been tasked with looking after the colonial subjects. The hierarchies that evolve in this film are thus threefold, with the women, particularly the simple Sayon, being at the lower end of the scale. Gender is intertwined with the nature–culture divide (MacCormack 1980), which in turn correlates to the degree of 'Japanization' and the success of the *kōminka seisaku*. The contradictions of the Japanese Empire, the blurred dichotomies of 'civilized' and 'uncivilized' that run through the film, are also intertwined with gender, as the women, at the lower end of the spectrum, remain 'more barbarian' than the men and in need of guidance (and culture/cultivation). In that sense, the women continue to symbolize the less civilized, more 'natural' Taiwan, whereas the Taiwanese men represent the process of progress.

In all of Ri Kōran's films, gender politics are always tied in with colonial politics. Ri Kōran has been rendered an object of desire by her submissiveness and the male gaze in the films, while keeping enough 'Chineseness' to credibly personify Japan's colonial desire for Asia, without the difficulties of having to conquer it. Her star persona retained the allure of embodying the seemingly successful colonial enterprise, whether she posed as a Taiwanese or Chinese woman. This illusion was carefully maintained, resulting in her being tried as a traitor and collaborator after the end of the war,⁹ based on the films that she had starred in (Yamaguchi and Fujiwara 1987, 2015).

4. Conclusions

I, Yamaguchi Yoshiko, a Japanese, was that Li Xianglan—a girl who knew nothing about the world, but still a Chinese entity concocted at the hands of the Japanese, just like Manchukuo. It pains me whenever I think about it.

Yamaguchi and Fujiwara (2015, Kindle loc. 1597)

Ri Kōran and her films remain a symbol of the Japanese Empire and its transnational nature (Baskett 2008; Chang 2015; Washitani 2001). Michael Baskett mentions a collage of five pictures of Ri Kōran, in which she wears all five national garbs of Manchuria (Mongolian, Chinese, Korean, Japanese and Russian), visually personifying the guiding principle of Manchuria, the Harmony of the Five Races (Baskett 2008). However, due to her nationality and gender, but also the way the film industry was structured, she could only ever embody what the Japanese imagined the Empire should be, not what it really was, masking the truth and creating an illusion. She represented the idealized version of the Japanese Empire, not the violent reality of the colonial conquest. Her characters were subservient and easily dominated, created to reassure her Japanese audiences of the colonial enterprise and present them with a justification for the colonial rule in China.

⁹ After the end of the war, Yamaguchi had to stand trial in China (which was then still being controlled by the Chinese nationalists), accused of collaborating with the Japanese in their propaganda films. She was acquitted, as she could prove her Japanese nationality (Yamaguchi and Fujiwara 1987, 2015).

Although Ri Kōran did make films for audiences in Manchuria (Tamura 2007), the Chinese were not the only intended audiences for her propaganda films. She was meant to be the model colonial subject for the Japanese, and, by extension, her subservience could have fulfilled the same function for the Chinese. Yet, unlike in the many other propaganda films of the time, in which, as High points out, the Chinese appear as faceless masses, her films stand out, because she gave some depth to the characters she played (High 2003). In spite of the transnational nature of her career and life, the Chinese persona she performed made her Chinese for the feel-good consumption of the Japanese, presenting them with an idealized version of their Empire, how things could be if all Chinese were like Ri Kōran.

Ri Kōran, her brand and career, remain invariably tied to the past. After the war, Yamaguchi tried to reinvent herself as Shirley Yamaguchi in Hollywood and Yamaguchi Yoshiko in Japan, but when she was stripped of her transnational star persona, she never managed to attain the same success as when she posed as Chinese and was Ri Kōran. The illusion that had surrounded her was too strong; Ri Kōran was a diva, a creation of the golden age of film and could not be replicated or reinvented. Nonetheless, Yamaguchi Yoshiko's whole life, not just her career, remained intertwined with the Japanese Empire. She was born in Manchuria, spent most of her youth in China and only migrated to Japan after the war. When her career as an actress ended, Yamaguchi Yoshiko became a politician in the Upper House of the Japanese Parliament, where she remained outspoken on the necessity for the Japanese to atone for Japan's imperial exploits. Her life came to full circle when she became head of the Asian Women's Fund, a fund set up to compensate former comfort women of the Japanese Imperial Army. Just as Ri Kōran/Yamaguchi Yoshiko remained an embodiment of Japan's imperial past, the Japanese Empire continues to cast a shadow deep into post-war Japan. Japan's images of China are equally still clouded by colonial imaginary (Kirsch 2015), seemingly never releasing the two countries from their shared past.

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