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Kokutai Spirit and the Concept of National Identity in Japanese National Policy Film

Agnes Siwi Purwaning Tyas
Graduate School of International Relations, Ritsumeikan University, Kyoto, Japan
E-mai: agnesiwisiwi@gmail.com

Abstract

The Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere was Japan's imperialist attempt to control the economies of East Asia and Southeast Asia in the first half of the twentieth century. The constituents of the Sphere included Japan, Korea, China, Manchuria, and some territories in Southeast Asia. To increase agricultural production and strengthen its military force, Japan recruited people from its colonies. As the leader of the Sphere, Japan wished to establish its own identity as distinct from—and superior to—that of the West. Propaganda campaigns and media were carefully prepared to manipulate the thoughts and behavior of the people to contribute to the supposed goal of mutual prosperity in the Sphere, by providing labor power for industry and agriculture as well as the military. Films were central to the Japanese propaganda. From 1936 to 1945, films that contain political and ideological messages of the Japanese leadership were produced and circulated both inside and outside Japan. This research aims to illuminate the identity of the Japanese imperial power that was promoted through the propaganda films and show how the films highlighted nationalism and culture harnessed during the war period as constitutive of Japan's national identity, or kokutai.

Keywords: National Policy Film, Japanese nationalism, propaganda film, Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere

Introduction

On August 1, 1940, Japan's then foreign minister Matsuoka Yosuke announced through a radio broadcast a new government plan and policy to establish the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere (Dai Tōa Kyōeiken). The plan represented an ideological basis and a new unifying, organizational principle to articulate the multiple military, political, economic, cultural, and

ethnic ties between Japan and Asia.[1] The purported foundation of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere was the sharing of mutual prosperity with all populations in Asia, including East Asia, Southeast Asia, and other countries in the Pacific Islands, with Japan as the leader. In this sphere, each country would be expected to contribute according to its ability. Japan, which has position in the center of the sphere, would be responsible for controlling not only economy but also all military and political activities occurring therein. Japan would contribute capital and technological expertise, while the other countries would contribute their resources, in the forms of raw materials for industrial productions and human capitals for industrial labor as well as military force. Possessing advanced technology, educated population, and military force that other Asian countries lacked, Japan both believed and promoted itself to be the country capable of leading Asia to liberation and prosperity. Promoting its version of Pan-Asianism, Japan offered to cooperate with countries in Southeast Asia under Western colonial rule in their struggle for independence by sending its own military force to the region. In a span of several years, Japan managed to expand their territory into Southeast Asia.

Under the Co-Prosperity scheme, Southeast Asian countries such as Thailand, Burma, and Indonesia were exploited by the new emerging Japanese Empire. These countries served as suppliers of provision for the imperial army and raw materials for Japanese-owned industries. The strategic location of these countries along maritime trade routes made them crucial for Japan to develop these areas as industrial and trade centers. The "co-prosperity," in reality, was largely a pretext for Japanese exploitation of the region's agricultural, mineral, and human resources. People from densely populated Southeast Asian countries were forced into labor and sent to build infrastructure such as railways and harbors, while many others were drafted into military service to help secure and protect Japan's military posts in the Pacific. Little was offered in return to those made to serve Japanese ends, who had to undergo physical labor under brutal living conditions and give up their lives for Japan's war efforts.

Japan's expansion into, and exploitation of, Southeast Asia was not accomplished solely by military means. *Senden*, or propaganda, played a large role in Japan's attempt to establish the Greater East Asia Co-prosperity

[1] Janis Mimura, "Japan's New Order and Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere: Planning for Empire," *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* 9, no. 49 (December 6, 2011), https://apjjf.org/2011/9/49/Janis-Mimura/3657/article.html.

Sphere. The Japanese government conducted state-led propagandic activities to ignite people's spirit to fight in the war and support government's directives for the war. The Japanese army and navy were the main actors to carry out the propaganda activity, and they produced and disseminated propaganda through media such as news, radio, and cinema. The propaganda was not limited for consumption within Japan but was also distributed in the areas occupied by Japan across China to Southeast Asia. Among all of the media employed by Japan, film was found to be the most effective means of communicating messages from the government. One successful example of a propaganda film was The Opium War, which contained strong and clear Pro-Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere and anti-European messages. There were about fifty such films made until 1941.[2] What all of these films attempted to impose onto the audience was a strong and unified *kokutai* (国体, literally: "national body"), or national identity.

The Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere

The Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere envisioned by Japan can be divided into three major regions: the islands of Japan, the neighboring East Asian areas of Korea, Manchuria and North China, and the colonial islands in the Pacific. The promise that was offered was that all populations in the areas, and just the Japanese, would benefit from the economic collaboration. However, whatever benefits of the Sphere were reaped mostly by the regions Japan considered to be its core territories, namely the Japanese archipelago, the Korean peninsula, parts of mainland China (the coastal cities and Manchuria), and Taiwan. Pan-Asianism, in effect, merely was a means for Japan to take the most advantage of resources from its "outer" colonies. Japan did not quite prioritize economic development in Southeast Asia. Because Japan actually lacked sufficient resources for the war, it needed Southeast Asia to supply the resources. Nevertheless, through propaganda and indoctrination, Japan attempted to present itself as the "agent" of liberation and an "older sibling" to the region. The strategy was at least partially successful, as Japan did manage to enlist a significant number of military personnel from the local population. Java, for example, provided 15,000 men for the Japanese military,[3] and nearly one thousand Indonesian men were trained to become

[2] Aiko Kurasawa, "Propaganda Media on Java under the Japanese 1942-1945," *Indonesia*, no. 44 (1987): 105, https://doi.org/10.2307/3351221.

[3] Ken'ichi Goto, "Indonesia During Japanese Occupation," in *The*

officers at the "voluntary army" organized by the Japanese military.[4]

After a remarkable period of rapid modernization following the Meiji Restoration, Japan emerged as the first "Asian" colonial power. Taiwan became Japanese colony in 1895, Korea in 1910, and Manchuria in 1931. This was followed by further military expedition in mainland China in 1937. Subsequently, Japan occupied Indochina in 1940. Then, following the attack on the Pearl Harbor in December 1941, Japan took over areas held by Allied powers in Asia Pacific, including Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, Dutch East Indies (Indonesia), Thailand, and Burma. Concurrently with military expansion, Japan began the mobilization of their foreign labor force toward heavy and exploitative physical labor that included constructing roads, railways, and bridges, digging minerals, and farming. By the end of the war in August 1945, at least fifteen million foreign workers were put into work.[5] Between 1939 and 1945, more than three hundred thousand Koreans were sent to Japan to work in construction or in coal mines. After the defeat in the Battle of the Midway in 1942, Japan decided to open a land-route to transport supplies from their existing base in Thailand to Burma. This construction project involved around 200,000 workers to complete a 412-kilometer railroad connecting Thailand and Burma in the period of fifteen months. Malays, Javanese, Chinese, Tamils, and Vietnamese, including girls and teenagers, also were put to work in this railroad project.

One product of Japan's commitment to the Co-Prosperity Sphere was the Southern Development Bank, which was established—under the auspices of the Bank of Japan—to finance production and trade activities within the sphere. The old dictum "those who rule the tropic rule the world" appeared to apply to Japan.[6] Having established itself in Indonesia and other parts in Southeast Asia, Japan was able to take control over coal, petroleum, rice, cot-

Encyclopedia of Indonesia in the Pacific War, ed. Peter Post et al. (Boston: Brill, 2010), 38.

[4] Shigeru Sato, "The PETA," in *The Encyclopedia of Indonesia in the Pacific War*, ed. Peter Post et al. (Boston: Brill, 2010), 134.

[5] W. Smith, "Beyond The Bridge on the River Kwai: Labor Mobilization in the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 58 (2000): 220, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547900003689.most of them mobilized against their will. For example, production of coal (then Japan's primary energy source

[6] Charles A. Fisher, "The Expansion of Japan: A Study in Oriental Geopolitics: Part II. The Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere," *The Geographical Journal* 115, no. 4/6 (1950): 183, https://doi.org/10.2307/1790152.

ton, rubber, castor, and other crops and minerals to support its industry and domestic economy during the years of war. Whatever investment that Japan did make in Southeast Asia—such as the introduction of more advanced agricultural methods and construction of infrastructure facilities—was designed to support that end. Grajdanzev estimates that in 1943, Southeast Asia contributed a combined total of 3,300 million yen towards Japan's military budget.[7]

Indonesia served as a particularly significant reservoir of both human and material resources for Japan. During Japan's occupation of Indonesia, military and political activities were concentrated in Java, the most populous and productive of the islands composing Indonesia. Its occupation of the island helped Japan "to establish self-sufficiency in rice, cotton, jute, castor-oil, coal and certain other items."[8] Moreover, the densely populated island of Java made it possible for Japan to send extra workforce to the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere. However, the workers were exposed to harsh living conditions, and suffered from overwork, malnutrition, and lack of medical care. In the island of Sukijang, Indonesia, the Japanese employed 750 men and around 400 to 500 of them died due to shortage of food and malaria.[9] The recorded death toll in Southeast Asia numbered 75,000.[10] As was the case in the Japanese mainland, young men in the colonies were drafted into the military. In early December 1944, the colonial administration in Korea announced that all Korean men who have reached the age of twenty must serve in the Japanese military.[11] By the end of the war, more than 110,000 Korean men had been recruited. In countries such as Myanmar, the Philippines and Indonesia, Japanese military officials recruited from the local population. The recruitment drive—which did see some success—was supported by the propaganda campaign the Japanese government funded.

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7 A. J. Grajdanzev, "Japan's Co-Prosperity Sphere," *Pacific Affairs* 16, no. 3 (1943): 317, https://doi.org/10.2307/2751531.

8 Shigeru Sato, "Labour Relations in Japanese Occupied Indonesia (CLARA Working Paper, No. 8)" (Working Paper, Amsterdam, 2000), 20, https://iisg.nl/clara/publicat/clara8.pdf.

9 Sato, 6.

10 Smith, "Beyond The Bridge on the River Kwai," 227.most of them mobilized against their will. For example, production of coal (then Japan's primary energy source

11 Brandon Palmer, "Imperial Japan's Preparations to Conscript Koreans as Soldiers, 1942—1945," *Korean Studies* 31 (2007): 63.

The Japanese Propaganda Campaign

Because the Japanese mainland lacked resources such as petroleum necessary to operate military vehicles, Southeast Asia was essential for Japan during the war. The Japanese leadership believed that winning the war depended heavily on their ability to lead the people.[12] Propaganda, including in the occupied territories, therefore, was integral to Japan's war effort. It was in October 1937 when seventy-four nationalist organizations in Japan gathered to discuss and prepare the National Spiritual Mobilization campaign, which aimed to build and unite Japanese spirit. Three years later, Prime Minister Konoe Fumimaro established the Cabinet Information Bureau (CIB) and granted full authority over mass media within and outside Japan. CIB was to produce or coproduce films, radio broadcasts, periodicals, novels, pamphlets, and posters with pro-Japan messages.[13] These media was to convey not simply the message, however, but also exhibit certain aesthetic qualities. CIB thus worked together with some of the most talented and well-known individuals in Japan's media industry.

CIB deemed film to be a particularly effective medium of propaganda. It oversaw the production and distribution of propaganda films, or what the Japanese government called "national policy films (国策映画, *kokusaku eiga*)," both within and outside Japan. Some of the earliest national policy films were made in China.[14] The production of these films was organized by the Japanese military during their expedition in China, and the films often depicted Japanese war effort against the common of Japan and China, Britain. In Korea, Japanese producers worked with the elite members of the Korean community to endow the pro-Japanese propaganda with a Korean face.[15] The propaganda was part of the integrationist policy Japan employed in Korea, which was intended to weaken the Korean identity—especially in the younger generation who had never experienced an independent Korea—such that they would become Japanese. The war fought by the Japanese Empire was a war that Koreans, too, ought to regard as glorious—such was the message. By 1943,

[12] Grajdanzev, "Japan's Co-Prosperity Sphere," 313.

[13] David C. Earhart, "Eusociality and the Japanese Media Machine in the Great East Asia War, 1931–1945," in *Routledge Handbook of Japanese Media*, ed. F. Darwing-Wolf (New York: Routledge, 2017), 52.

[14] David Desser, "From the Opium War to the Pacific War: Japanese Propaganda Films of World War II," *Film History* 7, no. 1 (1995): 36.

[15] Palmer, "Imperial Japan's Preparations to Conscript Koreans as Soldiers, 1942—1945," 67.

more than 800,000 applications had been submitted.[16] A similar strategy was employed in China. Although Japan relied more heavily on military force when it entered China compared to Korea, its ultimate intent was to "harmoniously" incorporate China into the project of Pan-Asianism.[17] Japanese propaganda may be judged to have been quite successful in promoting idea of Pan-Asianism—historical evidence shows that even some Chinese nationalists of the early twentieth century were attracted to the Japanese brand of Pan-Asianism.[18]

In Southeast Asia, Japan presented itself as a powerful Asian country willing to assist fellow Asian peoples to gain their independence from Western colonialists. For instance, Burmese lawyer and political leader Ba Maw regarded the relation between Burma and the Japanese Empire as a "gift," which contained the "promise of eventual independence and the establishment of a provisional government and national army" that would allow Burma to fight against Britain, alongside the Japanese. Addressing his fellow Burmese people, Ba Maw would go as far as to advise them to "consider the Japanese your own flesh and blood."[19]

The production of propaganda films happened in Indonesia, too, where a branch of Nihon-Eiga-Sha (Japan Film Company) was established, with the 16th Army overseeing its operation. CIB established organizations—*senden-bu*—that employed local Indonesians, tasked with the creation and distribution of pro-Japanese propaganda media. The language used in the media were Japanese and native languages, depending on where the media were circulated. At the same time as spreading pro-Japanese media, the propagandists worked to cut off Western audiovisual material from circulation. For instance, in Indonesia, communicating in foreign languages other than Japanese—such as English or Dutch—were prohibited. Radio broadcasts also covered news in Japanese and aired programs designed to teach the Japanese language. All these were intended to "Japanize" the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere

[16] Palmer, 64.

[17] Travis Chambers, "Japan's Colonialism and Wang Jingwei's Neo-Nationalism, 1938–1945," *The Chinese Historical Review* 28, no. 2 (July 3, 2021): 156, https://doi.org/10.1080/1547402X.2021.1990530.

[18] Barak Kushner, *The Thought War: Japanese Imperial Propaganda* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006), 118; Chambers, "Japan's Colonialism and Wang Jingwei's Neo-Nationalism, 1938–1945," 149.

[19] Peter B. High, *The Imperial Screen: Japanese Film Culture in the Fifteen Years' War, 1931-1945* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 373.

and build support for Japan's unification of Asia.

National Policy Films

Films produced in wartime Japan can be divided into three categories; national policy film (*kokusaku eiga*), entertainment film (*goraku eiga*) and art film (*geijutsu eiga*).[20] As noted previously, the identifying feature of national policy film is that the contents sound patriotic and pro-military government.[21] National policy film is produced to manipulate the thoughts and behavior of Japanese and those who lived in Japanese colonies to be similar to the Japanese.

The national policy film industry started to grow in 1936, and in 1941, there were thirty-two films produced in a year (Table 1). It is instructive to mention three films that exemplify the characteristics of national policy film most clearly. The first one is *The World Turns (Chikyu wa Mawaru).* The film starts with the premise that "war has been the human condition for tens of thousands of years."[22] That is a great event that repeats for a long time and all individuals must be ready to join the war. This film ignites the war spirit within them. The second film is *The Legend of Tank Commander Nishizumi* (*Nishizumi Senshachō Den*), which told the story of a patriotic "diehard" commander, Nishizumi. Through the character of Nishizumi who never retreats despite severe wounds, the film extols self-sacrifice for the glory of the nation. The last is *The Army Advances*. This film depicts the bravery of young Japanese military pilots and their parents, who at first disapprove of their sons joining the military but eventually are moved by the loyalty of their children toward the nation. The film does not only manipulate the thoughts of the young men but also women, especially mothers, to encourage their sons to fulfil their duty as subjects of the Japanese Empire.

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[20] Harald Salomon, "National Policy Films (Kokusaku Eiga) and Their Audiences," *Japonica Humboldtiana* 8 (2004): 167, https://doi.org/10.18452/6735.

[21] High, *The Imperial Screen*, 26; Kurasawa, "Propaganda Media on Java under the Japanese 1942-1945," 68; Earhart, "Eusociality and the Japanese Media Machine in the Great East Asia War, 1931–1945," 54.

[22] High, *The Imperial Screen*, 11.

Year	Films produced	Filmmakers
1936	2	2
1937	3	2
1938	4	3
1939	4	2
1940	13	7
1941	32	10

Table 1. The number of filmmakers and films produced in 1936–1941[23]

Starting in the early 1920s, there was already a modernization of the Japanese cinema,[24] and Japan had managed to produce films that could match American films in terms of style, storytelling, and cinematic techniques. The production of national policy films increased following a 1937 ministerial decree encouraged the production of documentary and fictional films that "contributed to the elevation of the idea of the national essence (*kokutai kannen*), the establishment of morality among the national population (*kokumin dôgi*), the correction of misunderstandings regarding our country's domestic and international situation (*naigai jôsei*), the propaganda (*senden*) for administrative matters pertaining to, among others, the military, industry, education, fire prevention, hygiene or the enhancement of the public good (*kôeki*) in other ways."[25] To maintain the quality of both the message and the aesthetics, the government further stipulated that film producers must be able to turn film into the perfect propaganda instrument for mobilizing mass emotions, while maintaining "the highest artistic achievement."[26] To this end, the government worked jointly with renowned filmmakers, such as Mizoguchi Kenji, Kurosawa Akira, and Kinoshita Keisuke. Film projects were also conferred to reputable production companies, such as Daiei, Shochiku, Toho, Nikkatsu, and Shinko. The first three companies were responsible for submitting one film

[23] Kurasawa, "Propaganda Media on Java under the Japanese 1942-1945," 70.

[24] David Bordwell, "Visual Style in Japanese Cinema, 1925-1945," *Film History* 7, no. 1 (1995): 16.

[25] High, *The Imperial Screen*, 27.

[26] High, 119; Kurasawa, "Propaganda Media on Java under the Japanese 1942-1945," 76.

each week.[27]

After Japan began occupying Southeast Asia, a branch of Nippon Eiga Sha, Nichiei, was established in Jakarta in April 1943. A film footage made in Indonesia presents images of Japan's conquest of Indonesia, symbolized by the Japanese army taking down the statue of a Dutch monarch in Jakarta. The animated film *Momotaro, Divine Warrior of the Sea (Momotaro: Umi no Shimpei*) is another example of a film that had relations to Indonesia, as it adopted the aesthetics of the Indonesian *wayang* shadow play.[28] This film was sent to other regions. Of the films produced in Java, one of the most interesting was *Berdjoeang* (*Minami no Ganbu*/Fighting). It was the first feature film to be made during the Japanese occupation of Indonesia that was directed by the Indonesian director, Arifin. The content of films produced outside Japan were monitored by the Cabinet Information Bureau, which required that producers send the script to Japan for assessment before filming. During Japanese occupation of Indonesia, fifty films were made in Java, including feature films and news reels.[29]

Films—documentaries, especially—were even shot in areas under military conflict. For example, in Manchuria in 1930s,[30] raw footages of battles were sent back and developed in the studios in Japan. One example of a film that came out of this is *The Manchurian March*, which tells the story of Lieutenant Yamashita's self-sacrifice. More of such films appeared in the 1940s, when the military regularly hired film production companies to shoot scenes from the war. Mainichi, for example, was hired to produce a documentary film titled *Defend Manchuria*. Other films that appeared around that time include *Destroying the Enemy—A Record of the Greater East Asian War, The Burning Pacific,* and *From the Start of the War to the Fall of Manila*,[31] the Malay War Record and Burma War Record in 1942, and Celebes in 1944. Interestingly, some of the war films were wrapped in the romantic narrative of a love story to satiate the demands of the audience and make them more palatable. Examples include *Opium War*, *China Nights*, and *The Army Advances*. To create more conflict in the life of the film characters, scriptwriters inserted roman-

[27] High, *The Imperial Screen*, 351.

[28] High, 423.

[29] Kurasawa, "Propaganda Media on Java under the Japanese 1942-1945," 102–6.

[30] Earhart, "Eusociality and the Japanese Media Machine in the Great East Asia War, 1931–1945," 54.

[31] High, *The Imperial Screen*, 349.

tic tropes such as love triangles. However, producing films catered to public demands was not always appreciated by the Japanese government, for the audience perceived such films as merely entertainment and the propagandistic message did not get across to them.

Kokutai spirit as the Japanese identity presented in National Policy Films

During wartime, defining "Japanese identity" was one of the principal aims of the country's leadership. If, as Kurasawa had argued, that the purpose of propaganda was to mold people into a "Japanese" pattern of behavior and thinking,[32] what it is to be Japanese—that is, Japanese identity—must be formerly defined. In propaganda films, it is possible to discern two main definitions of Japanese identity that are depicted through leading characters such as Nishizumi. The first is those who are Japanese by blood and birthland. The second is those who embody the "national spirit" of Japan. According to Japan's definition of the Co-Prosperity Sphere, those who are born and raised in mainland Japan fall under the first category: they are, by nature, Japanese. The term *kokumin* delineates Japanese in this sense. This type of identity is only exclusive to the Japanese. Not to forget, however, there is also an identity that one earns through the effort to truly define oneself as Japanese, that is, through devotion to one's own country. Thus, to *fully* perform Japanese identity, every individual *kokumin* still had to devote themselves to the national cause, although that individual may already be Japanese by virtue of blood and birthland.[33]

The Japanese adopted the term *kokutai*, or "national body," to accommodate the concept of self-sacrifice that is expected to flow in their blood. The term *kokutai* refers to those who share the same feeling of nationality.[34] This identity is, by definition, more inclusive and participatory than the abovementioned type of identity determined by blood and birthland, for all people of the Co-Prosperity Sphere can, in principle, practice the Japanese identity in this sense. This identity is not something that is naturally given but earned through

[32] Kurasawa, "Propaganda Media on Java under the Japanese 1942-1945," 59.

[33] Naoki Sakai, "Subject and Substratum: On Japanese Imperial Nationalism," *Cultural Studies* 14, no. 3–4 (July 1, 2000): 468, https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380050130428.

[34] Sakai, 491.

the acts of sacrifice. If so, works of art, including films produced as a medium of propaganda, become more relevant for establishing *kokutai*. The term "nation," however, is itself dynamic. The philosopher Watsuji Tetsuro (1889-1960)—whose thoughts apropos nationhood were clearly influenced by that of Martin Heidegger—rendered nation as *minzoku*, emphasizing thereby the constitution of different peoples as one organic unity, which was congruent with the Japanese agenda in the Co-Prospherity Sphare.[35] Earhart notes that the idea of *kokutai* fused together the emperor (imperial government), the nation, and the people.[36] Therefore, the Japanese propaganda always emphasized the relationship between the government and the people, where the emperor could remain as the central icon behind mobilization for the war.[37] Three aspects of the national identity qua *kokutai* that repeatedly appear in national policy films will be discussed below.

Nationalism

National policy films circulating from 1937 to 1945 showcase great stories about military heroism. These films often present the true calling of all national citizens by depicting young men who decide to leave their families or spouses to join the army in service of the nation. From *Tank Commander Nishizumi*, we learn that the military force embodies the true Japanese spirit. Those who are trained in the army and fight in the war are those who fulfill their duty as Japanese. They put the nation (*kokutai*) as their priority, even above their own needs. They are willing to leave their families, homes, and dreams. These were promoted as the requirements of *bushido*, the code of conduct for the militaristic side of the Japanese identity.[38] The emphasis on *bushido* tended to direct nationalism towards a kind of patriotism that extols self-sacrifice of the individual. Not only *Tank Commander Nishizumi*, but other films such as *Bouquet in the Southern Ocean*, *Suicide Troops of the Watch Tower*, and *A Man* promulgated this kind of patriotism. Watsuji Tetsuro gave support to the notion that nationalism demands one (1) to die happily for the

[35] Naoki Sakai, *Translation and Subjectivity: On "Japan" and Cultural Nationalism*, trans. Meaghan Morris (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, n.d.), 111.

[36] Earhart, "Eusociality and the Japanese Media Machine in the Great East Asia War, 1931–1945," 51.

[37] Kushner, *The Thought War*, 10.

[38] Michael Plugh, "Born Again Yokozuna: Sports and National Identity," in *Routledge Handbook of Japanese Media*, ed. F. Darwing-Wolf (New York: Routledge, 2017), 101.

sake of one's Lord (the Emperor) and (2) to not die until the enemy is defeated.[39] The latter is to be preferred over the former, for whereas the former still involves self-consciousness and emphasizes the importance of one's self-sacrifice, the latter puts one's duty above everything else because the authorities expected the people to make sacrifices.[40]



Figure 1. A sergeant dies in the arms of the commander in *The Legend of Tank Commander Nishizumi* (Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OPHggL5jOnU)

In *Tank Commander Nishizumi* for instance, there is a scene showing the Japanese flag, Hinomaru, stained in blood, representing the fierce battle in the course of which the soldiers had given their lives up for their homeland. Even the beginning of the film features a scene where a wounded sergeant from Kaneda regiment, shed in blood, crawl for miles to the Japanese military base to report to his commander, before eventually dying in the arms of the commander. Such scenes are repeated many times in the first half of the film, which depicts the patriotic acts of the Japanese soldiers during the Sino-Japanese war. In almost all of the battle parts of the film, the Chinese enemy is not explicitly shown. Instead, they manifest through the sound of the guns and mines. Focus and emphasis are given almost exclusively to the efforts, bravery, and self-sacrifice of the Japanese soldiers, who are shown as men who died honorable deaths because they had given their all for the glory of the nation.

Japanese nationalism can also be presented in films whose main characters are not Japanese by blood and birthland. One such example is *Berdjoeang*, which was made in Indonesia in 1943. After listening to the speech of a propagandist, the film's main character, Anang, goes home and conveys to his

[39] Sakai, "Subject and Substratum," 473.

[40] Kushner, *The Thought War*, 52.

parents his intention to enlist in the Japanese army. He persuades his parents to let him choose his own path to serve Indonesia by fighting alongside the Japanese soldiers against the Western colonizers. Self-sacrifice is clearly a symbol of devotion to the nation; but such self-sacrifice, films such as *Berdjoeang* attempt to suggest, can and should be made through sacrificing for the *Japanese* army.

The mass mobilization of men for the Japanese army was aided, among other measures, by the decision made in the diet in 1943 that everyone within the Greater East Co-Prosperity Sphere must support the military at war.[41] To some extent, this blurred the line between civilian and military life, because to be called "true Japanese," one had to be involved in military activities.[42] Within the former Western colonies of the Co-Prosperity Sphere, the promises of prosperity and independence were made to encourage cooperation with the Japanese.



Figure 2. A scene from *Berdjoeang*
(Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D46kVfKysqQ)

The lengths to which individuals must go to embody kokutai were depicted in films such as *Tank Commander Nishizumi* and *Berdjoeang*. In the *Nishizumi*, there is a scene where Nishizumi receives a letter from Arakawa Tatsuji, the young brother of Private Arakawa who was killed in battle. Tatsuji writes in the letter that he and his mother did not cry for his big brother's death but smiled, for his brother had died honorably. In *Berdjoeang*, Anang's parents initially express their objection against his decision to join the volunteer army established by the Japanese. However, the film depicts Anang's parents

[41] Grajdanzev, "Japan's Co-Prosperity Sphere," 325.

[42] Plugh, "Born Again Yokozuna," 101.

being convinced and even feel pride in Anang's determination.

Masculinity

One aspect of national identity that cannot be absent from the discussion of the Japanese wartime propaganda is masculinity. Indeed, masculinity has become a predominant aspect of the Japanese identity since the Meiji Period, and its predominance is discernible in national policy films. The vast majority of the protagonists of national policy films are male. There was a national policy film from 1942 entitled *Otoko no iki* (literally: "A Man's Spirit")—which was also screened in Java—whose story was directed at young males with aim of igniting their spirit toward creating the "New Asia," which signified a new political and economic order under the Japanese, which would include China as one of the members. The story of *Tank Commander Nishizumi* concludes with a narrator telling the audience that, although the body of Nishizumi has returned to dust in south Kankisho, his soul remains alive in the hearts of his soldiers who kept on fighting bravely in Joshu and Kanko.



Figure 3. Nishizumi was injured badly in the battle of Chinkataku River
(Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OPHggL5jOnU)

Throughout the film, the character of Nishizumi is described as physically strong and resilient. Despite being injured, he does not return to the base to cure his wound but keeps on fighting with the regiment. As Ruth Benedict had explained, the notion that surrendering is shameful was indoctrinated into the consciousness of the Japanese.[43] When a soldier is wounded or taken as prisoner, he must never surrender. Otherwise, he would be considered a disgrace.

[43] Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture* (Mariner Books, 1946), 40.

When Nishizumi and Murayama dies, their bodies are covered in Japanese flags, to symbolize of their honor and dignity. When one of Nishizumi's comrades, Uematsu, sobs over his death, he is told by another solider that he must not cry—for it is shameful for a man to cry. The film thus convey that worry, fear, and sadness must not be parts of men's emotions and lives. Referring to Benedict, Lummis argues explains the "shame culture" in Japan as one in which people's behaviors are influenced by how they wish to look in the eyes of others, with the most important consideration being whether they will be honored or shamed.[44]



Figure 4. The voluntary army is greeted by the villagers in the film *Di Desa*
(Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qLr768_OU1w)

While many national policy films made in Japan often present the story of heroism or self-suicidal acts, there are also other alternatives narrations that depict how nationalism and masculinity can be embodied in a different manner—men need not be in uniforms to be patriotic, or to be *men*. Such is the idea depicted in a national policy film made in Java, entitled *Di Desa* (In the Village), produced in 1944 and directed by Ariffin. The film begins with a scene portraying a battalion of gallant volunteer army visiting their hometown while off-duty. The soldiers, dress up in their uniforms, are showered with praise and hospitality of the village people. Bulat, a man of modest presentation working as a farmer, tells his friends, Tinggi and Kardiah, that if he had joined the army, he would look more attractive and dignified. However, his friends reminded Bulat that every man can participate in the war in two ways, on the battleground like the soldiers and behind the scenes through productive

[44] C. Douglas Lummis, "Ruth Benedict's Obituary for Japanese Culture," *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* 5, no. 7 (July 12, 2007), https://apjjf.org/-C--Douglas-Lummis/2474/article.pdf.

labor.

The structure of male-dominated society in Japan portrayed in those films is a product of Japan's long history.[45] Masculinity is valorized to such an extent, that the idealized women depicted in films are those who exhibit characteristics associated with masculinity. For instance, the character of Kardiah in *Di Desa* is identified as "*wanita jantan*," or masculine women, because of her "modern" way of thinking and acceptance of nationalism. Characters such as the aforementioned Kardiah and Hasanah in *Berdjoeang* portray the quality of ideal women in military society. This idealization is an extension of *Onna no Nihonjinron*—account of Japanese woman—that appeared in prewar Japan,[46] which also emphasized that working-class women should share responsibilities with men and contribute to the war. Women's labor is thus not limited to the household but extends into working in the farms to feed the family, secure war supply, and increase agricultural production.

High culture

Japan regarded as its world historical mission to be the beacon for all world culture and tame the people through its culture. As Palmer argues, both cultural and military activities were interrelated, their aims coterminous.[47] Integrating diverse populations into the cultural unity of the imperial nation represented by the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere was a task inseparable from cultural policy.[48] This integration was not aimed toward a pluralism, however: everyone who belongs in Japan's sphere must fit certain values, standards or norms, determined by its elites and leaders and reflected in its propaganda. In this respect, culture was turned into a medium to further the interest of the privileged and the powerful,[49] on whose hands decisions on what culture—or "national character"—is to be considered as constitutive of the Japanese identity fall.

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[45] Tom Gill, "Failed Manhood on the Streets of Urban Japan. The Meanings of Self-Reliance for Homeless Men," in *Recreating Japanese Men*, ed. Sabine Frühstück and Anne Walthall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 177–200, https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520950320-011.

[46] Shigeru Sato, "Gender, Consumerism, and Women's Magazines in Interwar Japan," in *Routledge Handbook of Japanese Media*, ed. F. Darwing-Wolf (New York: Routledge, 2017), 40.

[47] Palmer, "Imperial Japan's Preparations to Conscript Koreans as Soldiers, 1942—1945," 66.

[48] Sakai, "Subject and Substratum," 475.

[49] Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), 11.

As a number of national policy films suggest, the values of patience, loyalty, and endurance were actively advertised as forming a distinctly Japanese identity.[50] Earhart characterizes this identity as *eusocial* and quasi-religious,[51] in which extreme self-sacrifice for the sake of an idealized and attainable vision of national greatness and the nation's "high priest," the emperor, is valorized. In this respect, what forms the basis of "nation" within the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere is not consanguinity but partaking in the shared cultural identity or national character.



Figure 5. A scene from *Momotaro*
(Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VdzrgJA_iWA)

The propaganda films that were circulating in the years between 1937 and 1945 portray the Japanese culture as superior to other Asian cultures to justify its leadership role, but also as distinct from the Western culture. The West was often depicted as the evil, as seen for example, in *Momotaro, the Warrior-God of the Sea* (*Momotaro, umi no shinpei*) directed by Seo Mitsuyo. In the film, the British general, Percival, is described as possessing a horn like a demon, or *oni*, and as lacking martial dignity.[52] Contrary to the dignified behavior of the Japanese characters in the film, the British troops in the film are often seen inebriated, smoking, and gambling. Similarly, *Tank Commander Nishizumi* also includes a scene wherein Nishizumi helps a wounded woman who has just given birth, despite the woman being Chinese, the very country Nishizumi is at war with. In that scene, Nishizumi calms the woman, assuring her that the Japanese soldiers will not harm her. However, after being helped by the Japanese soldiers and physician, she flees with her husband and leaves

[50] Bordwell, "Visual Style in Japanese Cinema, 1925-1945," 27.

[51] Earhart, "Eusociality and the Japanese Media Machine in the Great East Asia War, 1931–1945," 51.

[52] High, *The Imperial Screen*, 346.

the newborn baby to die in a cold winter night. The modern and "civilized" Japanese are thus starkly contrasted against the "barbarity" of the Chinese, lending justification to the Japanese ideology that Japan, as the country that truly values humanity, is the rightful leader of Asia.



Figure 6. The scene in *Berdjoeang* when Saman is saddened because he was rejected from Heiho
(Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D46kVfKysqQ)

Japan put itself above other Asian nations, seeing its task as that of introducing civilization to those "backward" peoples—by force, if necessary.[53] Thus, in films set outside Japan, the local people are often depicted as barbarians. The narrator of the film *Burma War Record* (1942), for example, says: "because life is easy here [in Myanmar], the locals are a trusting and happy-go-lucky lot. They spend their days in idleness, believing in the afterlife." As Peter High explains, the Burmese, who do not possess the *kokutai* spirit, are regarded as a people awaiting to be lifted from their humble material conditions and backwardness by the more advanced Japanese civilization.[54] Similarly, the cartoon feature *Momotaro, Divine Warrior of the Sea* (1944) depicts the islanders as uncivilized, illiterate, uneducated, and carefree. They redeem their worth only when the display "great diligence" in helping the Japanese occupiers to prepare a military airfield.[55] Some films elucidate the *kokutai* spirit by depicting what is antithetical to it. In *Berdjoeang*, a character who refuses to become a soldier, Ahmad, is portrayed as rather unfortunate compared to his fellows who have chosen to devote themselves to the Japa-

[53] Shogo Suzuki, *Civilization and Empire: China and Japan's Encounter with European International Society* (London: Routledge, 2009), 144.

[54] High, *The Imperial Screen*, 360.

[55] High, 360.

nese cause. Ahmad is censured by his friend, Hasanah, for having no goal in life, and at the end of the film, Ahmad in fact turns out to be a thief, hence as morally corrupt. The film thereby depicts how individuals who are selfish and materialistic—qualities that are antithetical to the *kokutai* spirit[56]—will eventually get their comeuppance.

Conclusion

Japanese and non-Japanese members of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere were expected to perform the *kokutai* identity to belong to the community of supposed mutual prosperity. Propaganda, particularly propaganda films called national policy films, was a key tool used by the Japanese to promulgate what it is to perform that identity. The vast majority of these films, produced with the intention of manipulating people's thoughts and behavior, told the story of self-sacrifice, which the Japanese leadership regarded as crucial for igniting the fighting spirit of the youth.

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[56] Mimura, "Japan's New Order and Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere: Planning for Empire"; Sakai, *Translation and Subjectivity*, 175.

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