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Glorify the Empire
Japanese Avant-Garde
Propaganda in Manchukuo



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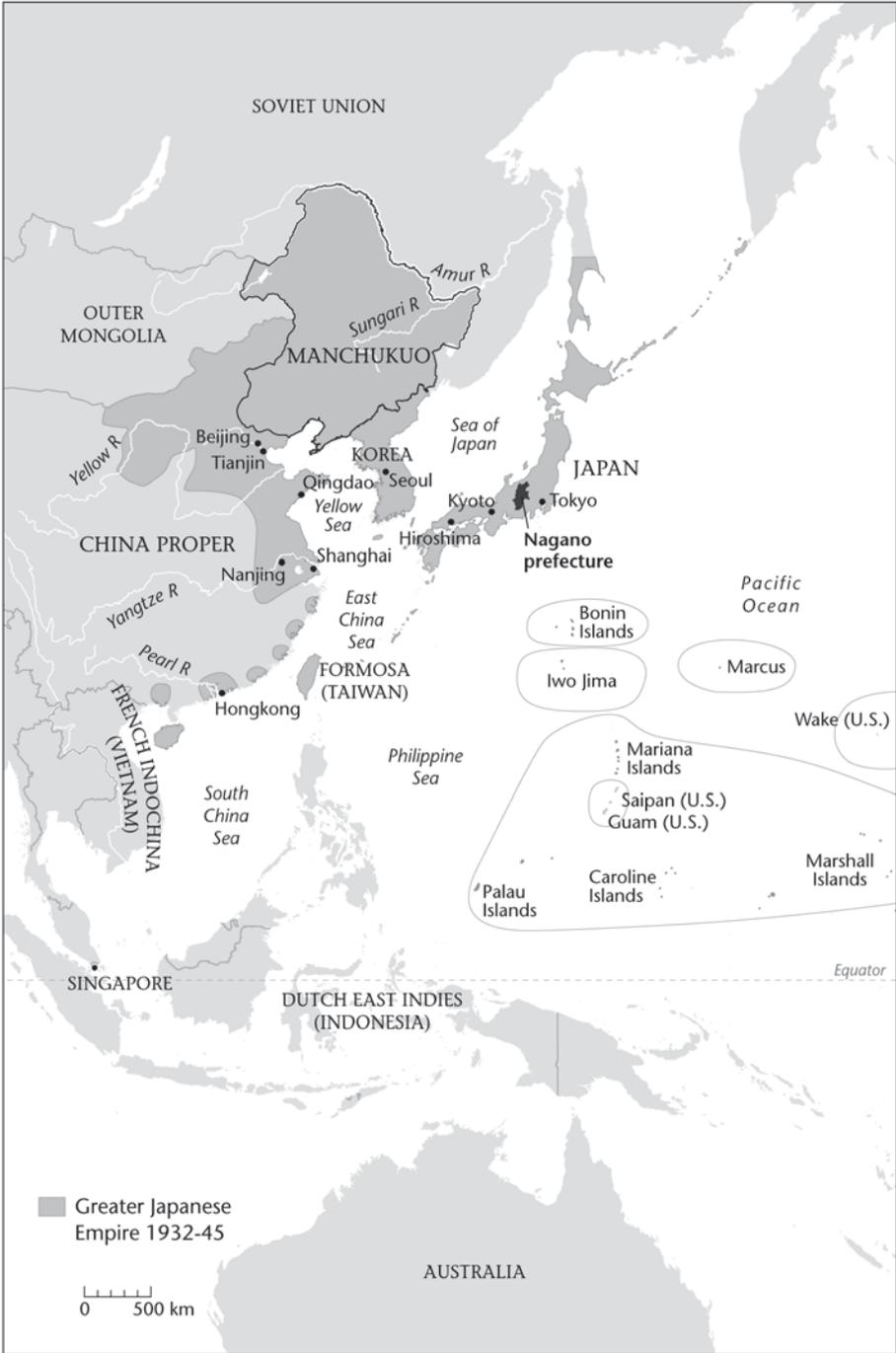
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Glorify the Empire



Greater Japanese Empire, 1880-1945. *Courtesy of Eric Leinberger.*



Manchukuo, 1932-45. *Courtesy of Eric Leinberger.*

Introduction: Propaganda in the Manchukuo Context, 1932-45

In late fall 1943, amidst the gathering gloom of wartime, Ai Mitsu's (1907-46) oil paintings began to freeze as he attempted to depict Harbin's famed Russian-style Kitayskaya district. The harsh Manchurian climate felt out of place in the deceptively bright exotic city, and he resisted the physical discomfort of the cold until his medium failed him. The Japanese painter then packed up his easel and painting materials and entered the well-appointed Hôtel Moderne, a venue that had lodged the Lytton Commission in late 1931. Manchukuo's continental climate, ultramodern cities, and vast sense of space all underlined its stark difference from Japan.¹ As he gazed at the frozen landscape through double-paned glass, Ai Mitsu's thoughts turned, with some trepidation, back to his island homeland and his imminent return. Not long afterwards, the Japanese government drafted the neurasthenic artist into the military. His last sojourn in Manchukuo would feel like a brief reprieve from his duties to the imperial state.

However, since the mid-1930s, Ai Mitsu's Manchurian connections had promoted not only his career but also the interests of the new state's Japanese handlers. In 1935, on the invitation of a brother-in-law who worked for the South Manchuria Railway Company (SMRC), he had come to Manchukuo and, on his return to Japan, reaffirmed his status as a cutting-edge oil painter. In a new nation obsessed with modernization, the modernity of his work and his membership in an important Tokyo-based avant-garde artists' group had helped bolster Manchukuo's emergent cultural scene. The Japanese-led government had overlooked Ai Mitsu's colleagues' earlier involvement with the Tsukiji Little Theatre and their flirtation with Marxism, along with their sympathy for the proletariat. Though often equivocal, Ai Mitsu's images of Manchuria piqued the interest of the Japanese public.

Ai Mitsu was only one of the many artists and writers with a history of left-wing sympathies or avant-garde style who flocked to Manchukuo during a period of crucial state formation under Imperial Japan. After 1932, the Manchukuo state attempted to couple traditional Asian values with a modern

infrastructure and material culture by co-opting earlier intellectual discourses of Chinese nationalism – expressed in such Confucian-inspired slogans as *Ôdôrakudô* (Paradise of the Kingly Way) and *minzoku kyôwa* (ethnic/racial harmony). Attracted by Manchuria's exoticism, economic opportunities, and the publicity given to their endeavours, Japanese cultural producers snatched up invitations by SMRC, the Kantô Army, and various other Japanese-run commercial or governmental organizations, such as the *Kyôwakai* (Concordia Association). By enlisting visiting Japanese artists or observers, these organizations hoped, in images and written words, to evoke the state's ideals of a modern paradise and ethnic harmony. The visitors' observations, however, ranged from unabashedly positive to darkly equivocal. They also maintained some of the characteristics of the leftist literary and artistic movements of the 1920s and early 1930s, making them more avant-garde than modernist in character.

By accepting a tour to Manchukuo, formerly left-wing Japanese intellectuals were making a clear statement in favour of Imperial Japan and its endeavours. Literary scholar Kawamura Minato likens their journeys to *fumi-e*, the Tokugawa-era practice of treading on a Christian image to renounce one's allegiance to Christianity.² Indeed, 95 percent of all left-wing Japanese intellectuals *did* renounce their political ideals after the Manchurian Incident of 1931, which led to Japan's invasion of northeast China.³ A Manchukuo tour was an important way for leftist artists and writers such as Yamada Seizaburô (1896-1970) to show their support for the imperial state. Yet, at least aesthetically and thematically, many of these sojourners' works remained the same as ever. Manchukuo was an important site for the convergence of both left- and right-wing ideologies, a place where the formation of the utopian state functioned as a collaborative project for media-makers of all stripes.⁴ Indeed, fascism, in its original Italian inception, *was* a form of socialism – albeit a right-wing version – and this is what eventually prevailed in Manchukuo. Thus, the powerful imagery created by intellectuals who followed a socialist political philosophy could be used for various and diverging ends.

By the mid-1930s, a dissolving of the left/right political binary is evident in the efforts of Japanese cultural producers on both sides of the political spectrum. Through their cultural production, these people created an ideological framework for Manchukuo. In the Japanese context, Sheldon Garon argues that a shared commitment to modernization and modernity allowed seemingly politically disparate reformers to join forces with the state.⁵ Joshua Fogel's translation of SMRC researcher Itô Takeo's (1895-1985) memoir also corroborates the occurrence of this in his organization, where elements of liberalism and Taishô intellectual trends remained alongside a Marxist analysis that was still used for its rational and "scientific" properties.⁶ In Manchukuo, the science, modernity, and modernization of the West merged

with Asian-inspired principles to form a compelling reason for Japanese and others to support the new nation. The writings of Japanese intellectuals invariably supported this rhetoric during a time when various actors increasingly began to view northeast China as valuable to the Japanese Empire. Moreover, by the late 1920s, Japan was headed toward a path that was to diverge from Taishō democracy and to embrace certain characteristics of the political experiments of 1930s fascist Italy and Germany. In fact, the Manchukuo state that emerged out of Kantō Army violence followed the fascist example even more closely than did Japan.

This study primarily investigates intellectuals who, in the Manchukuo context, either underwent a political conversion or at least expressed tacit support for Imperial Japan. I examine the cultural production and professional trajectories of writers, photographers, and artists who created modernist reflections of the new state, including Yamada Seizaburō, Fukuzawa Ichirō (1898-1994), Ai Mitsu, Fuchikami Hakuyō (1889-1960), Haruyama Yukio (1902-94), and Kawabata Yasunari (1899-1972).⁷ These men were important in that they were Japan's leading representatives of cutting-edge literature, art, and photography during the 1930s and 1940s and had earlier expressed either a radical aesthetic (i.e., surrealism) or politics (i.e., proletarianism) in tandem with avant-garde forms of representation. The trip to Manchukuo, while overtly displaying their allegiance to Imperial Japan, also gave an important boost to these men's careers and even strengthened their role as "cultural authorities" back in Japan. Some, like Yamada, even suffered police persecution due to their left-wing orientation, and they saw the Manchukuo sojourn as a path toward rehabilitation after undergoing political conversion. Each of the intellectuals I discuss was inexorably drawn toward participating in the creation of what curator Takeba Jō calls a "reflected utopia."⁸

The representations of Manchukuo created by Japanese observers were distinctive in that they were usually made for a national, regional, or international audience, ostensibly justifying the modernity of the new state and its ideological aims. Like Walter Benjamin's concept of art in the age of mechanical reproduction, the works produced for the Manchukuo project functioned as agents of ideological mass mobilization – a key reason these works can be defined as "propaganda." Each of the individuals covered in this study participated in saturating Japan (and other places) with Manchukuo-themed literature, works of art, and photographs during the period of Imperial Japan's expansion on the continent, thus serving as unofficial propagandists. For this reason, I call their cultural production, which retained aspects of an earlier left-wing moment, "avant-garde propaganda." I investigate the nature of this "unofficial" propaganda in the Manchukuo context.

Regarding propaganda in Imperial Japan, Alan Tansman argues that, "to Japanese officialdom in the 1930s, propaganda meant the cultivation of

cultural values and attitudes that would be held so deeply they would appear innate and not imposed.⁹ For fascist Manchukuo's Japanese Confucian-inspired state framers, the popular assimilation of national ideals should, according to concrete principles inherent in nature (*li*), appear as a natural aspect of the rational ordering of a benevolent environment promoted by good governance. This idea was verifiable in observable phenomena in the natural world, thus rationalizing the superimposition of a largely Japanese political structure, supposedly based on *ren* (benevolence), on a Chinese populace. In Japanese eyes, such philosophies as *Ôdô* and *kyôwa*, already rejected by Republican Chinese reformers, had a quasi-scientific and, therefore, modern basis.

Thus, propaganda in the utopian state did not have to be forced on a materially and spiritually satisfied populace; rather, this populace actively participated in the state's ideological formation through mass culture organizations such as the Concordia Association, which imparted Confucian-inspired values.¹⁰ Later (in Chapter 6), I examine the role of this organization and its connections to the Manchukuo Publicity and News Bureau, the new state's primary propaganda apparatus, both based in Shinkyô (contemporary Changchun, People's Republic of China [PRC]). I also investigate high-ranking Japanese bureaucrats' views of propaganda (or "official" propaganda) in relation to Manchukuo's culture during wartime and how the Concordia Association attempted to mollify social and political differences through the rhetoric of "culture." In Manchukuo, national propaganda chief Mutô Tomio (1904-98) and others believed that an effective way to realize the "cultivation of cultural values and attitudes" was to mobilize culture and the arts for propaganda purposes (see Chapters 4 and 6).

In clarifying categories of propaganda in Manchukuo, I refer to Barak Kushner, who, in his investigation of Imperial Japan's thought wars, recognizes two subsets of Japanese wartime propaganda, both "official" and "unofficial," which can also be applied to Manchukuo: "*Official propaganda* emanated from *government channels* and *related agencies*. *Unofficial propaganda* developed within *non-governmental institutions*, such as private companies that cut records, produced advertising, etc."¹¹ Here, I focus on elite Japanese intellectuals who were involved in making "unofficial propaganda," and I analyze the propagandistic significance of their works. Kushner notes that, in the Japanese wartime example, "Japan's propaganda comprised a mix of messages, from nativist to promotion of the modern, which were developed by an increasingly professional staff. The messages conveyed a sense not only of Japan's modernity, but also of its mission to bring culture and progress to the rest of Asia."¹² In the following chapters, I investigate how a Japanese-led culture and modernity became important themes in the propaganda that sustained the Manchukuo project.

I focus on how Japanese cultural producers of a formerly leftist or avant-garde orientation were attracted to Manchukuo for various reasons and eventually produced literary works, art, and photography that, for the most part, portrayed the region's development in a positive light. After 1932, government propaganda organizations like the Manchukuo Publicity and News Bureau worked closely with SMRC to promote a positive vision of the new state and its development by enlisting these intellectuals to create cultural propaganda. The heads of these organizations viewed the "avant-garde" as modern, or cutting edge, rather than, per the early 1920s definition of the term, as indicating a left-wing political orientation.¹³ The works of these Japanese intellectuals, though falling under the general category of "arts," can be described as what Peter O'Connor terms "propaganda vehicles."¹⁴ This is because they contributed to saturating Japan with positive media representations of Manchukuo – a Japan that, by the 1930s, was already obsessed with the new state. Following the 1937 eruption of the Second Sino-Japanese War, Manchukuo's prominence rose still further as it was put forward as an example of a peaceful, stable nation, unlike China proper, which was embroiled in a war with its more advanced imperialist neighbour. Moreover, after 1940, Manchukuo increasingly served as an ideological template for the territories in Southeast Asia subjected to Japanese military incursions. Of course, not all Japanese depictions of Manchukuo praised the nation, and some included unflattering critiques or avant-garde equivocation.

However, the individuals I discuss served as "unofficial propagandists" (Louise Young's term),¹⁵ or "occasional propagandists" (O'Connor's term).¹⁶ These people included "journalists and writers not specifically or consistently contracted to write for Japan – who found themselves drawn into official efforts to explain and justify Japan's position."¹⁷ The latter category describes intellectuals much like Yamada, or the former avant-garde poet Haruyama, and also includes Fuchikami (in his brief employment as a temporary adviser for SMRC) and Kawabata (as a guest of the Kantô Army and *Manchuria Daily News*). At times, they were indeed official propagandists: consider Fuchikami's 1932 commissioned work for the Kantô Army and Mutô's 1939-43 role as head of the Manchukuo Publicity and News Bureau. Mutô also wrote plays and short stories and, thus, created "unofficial propaganda" that supported his role as official propagandist. In other words, instead of continuously serving as active propagandists on the state's behalf, these unofficial propagandists created works that functioned as "propaganda vehicles."¹⁸

By building on earlier assertions by Young, Jacqueline Atkins, and Kushner, I argue that any Manchukuo-themed works produced by a Japanese writer, artist, or photographer served as a *form* of propaganda – both because they increased awareness of the new state for general Japanese, regional, and

international audiences and because of where they were published, displayed, or depicted. Often, they were presented through presses, exhibitions, or distribution networks connected to SMRC, the Concordia Association, or news organizations under the purview of the Manchukuo Publicity and News Bureau. If these intellectuals were hosted by the latter organizations, they were even more likely to mention the state and its patronage. Thus, their works contributed generally to saturating the mass media and art world with Manchukuo-related cultural production. In other words, through providing publicity, they indirectly supported state aims.

In her 1998 study, Louise Young notes how, in the Japan of the 1930s, “Mass culture industries flooded their marketplace with Manchurian-themed products, and in the process disseminated a specific package of information and a set interpretation of events on the continent.”¹⁹ In addition, Atkins’s 2005 examination of war motif textiles in Japan, Britain, and the United States indicates that even fashion could support the propaganda aims of a government during wartime. Thus, it inspires a broadening of the definition of propaganda in the Manchukuo context.²⁰ Kushner’s 2006 study of Japanese wartime propaganda similarly views it as a multifaceted category, including popular culture, performance, and the activities of cultural groups such as Japanese *manzai* (comic dialogue) troupes and the *pen-butai* (pen brigade) circulating in China during the war.²¹ In wartime Japan and throughout its Empire, Kushner reveals how “plans called for propaganda that either sprang from society itself or was made to appear that way. Japanese on all levels of wartime society deemed reciprocity – alliances among the civilian, military and bureaucratic circles – to be the key to successful propaganda campaigns.”²²

Until recently, most Japanese and Chinese studies viewed “propaganda” as essentially a top-down phenomenon, whereby, in both Japan and occupied northeast China, the state issues a directive that is picked up by various organizations in charge of disseminating it to the public.²³ This approach, however, obscures a grassroots, entrepreneurial side to propaganda, like that envisioned by Young, Atkins, and Kushner, in which the state’s ideas are continually reappropriated in a quasi-mercantile fashion by diverse groups such as itinerant drama troupes, sellers of themed foods, the fashion industry, and social clubs.

In contrast to earlier Japanese scholarship on propaganda, Kishi Toshihiko’s 2010 study views SMRC promotional posters and advertisements, Concordia Association bills, and Manchukuo commemorative stamps/postcards as important artefacts supporting the aims of both Imperial Japan and the Manchukuo government.²⁴ This research stems from Kishi’s analysis of hundreds of images of visual media related to Manchuria and Manchukuo, including posters, stored in a database that he once maintained.²⁵ His findings concur with those of Lincoln Cushing and Ann Thompkins, who, in

their 2007 investigation of revolutionary art produced during China's 1966-76 Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, argue that these mass-produced posters functioned as "commercial artworks" sold in government bookstores, shops, and local markets. Thus, they helped to assimilate the government's propaganda messages into ordinary life by serving as decorations for the home during festivals and other important occasions.²⁶ As Kishi notes, in the Manchukuo case, ordinary people came across SMRC advertisements in newspapers and magazines, viewed Concordia Association posters on city or village buildings, and sent each other depictions of the new state in the mail – all without realizing they were aiding in the diffusion of propaganda.²⁷ These two recent studies show how ideologically inspired visual media, by intruding into daily life through various patterns of public consumption, can support the propaganda aims of both left- and right-wing regimes.²⁸

Manchukuo-themed literature, art, and photography of a fascist hue were assimilated into ordinary life through their consumption as cultural products. For example, Japanese consumer demand for Manchurian-themed paintings helped to generate support for Japan's development of Manchukuo by saturating the art market with certain depictions of the region. In this manner, images of Manchuria made their way into the middle-class Japanese family's Western-style drawing room, popularized in the early Shōwa period. As scholars like Kushner point out, this penetration into daily life is what differentiated Japanese propaganda from that of other countries.

The power of the literary, artistic, and photographic works produced by Japanese intellectuals arose from their ability to communicate symbols of Manchukuo that easily translated into an acceptance of the specific ideological paradigms that Japanese bureaucrats wished to cultivate. For Kushner, these symbols are indicative of the construction of a successful, greater Japanese Empire, emphasizing "physical strength, industrial capability, political stability, modern architecture, and advanced standards of hygiene."²⁹ I show how literature, art, and photography in the Manchukuo context propagated such recurring, and even contradictory, symbols as a "lazy" Chinese populace, superhuman Chinese coolies, productive urban worksites, "virgin" land, vast Manchurian plains, and well-organized Japanese *kaitakuchi* (rural development areas) – thereby reinforcing an ideology that necessitated further Japanese control of Manchukuo and its integration with domestic Japan (*naichi*).

This also raises the question of how visual arts like painting or photography could serve as propaganda. By the mid-1930s, Manchurian-themed images in paintings and photographs abounded in Japan's official and avant-garde art worlds. The large canvases of the surrealist artist Fukuzawa and his cohort even decorated the walls of Japanese military and government offices. Depictions of empty plains with newly constructed buildings in Manchukuo's capital city Shinkyō highlighted the fact that development occurred amidst

a naked, barren plane, or on “virgin land” – the term most commonly used. Imperialist powers like Japan often exploited such conceits as empty lands ripe for colonization, a view that negated the historical reality of Chinese and Korean resistance to an artificially promoted ethnic (or racial) harmony.

How might these symbols, produced by Japanese writers, artists, and photographers, have served Manchukuo’s propaganda aims by fashioning a certain ideology? Alan Tansman, in his study of the aesthetics of Japanese fascism, argues that, “it is through the products of the imagination that ideology is most effectively diffused, even as these works absorb the ideological atmosphere in which they are created.”³⁰ Whether in the proletarian context of late 1920s and early 1930s Japan, or in Manchukuo’s fascist political climate after 1932, Japanese intellectuals (and the organizations hosting them) recognized the ideological power of cultural production (see Chapters 3, 4, and 5). In addition, if one accepts Tansman’s argument that “culture is where fascism forms its ideological power” and that “Japanese fascism was fueled by a literary sensibility,”³¹ then the importance of writers like Yamada (as a converted left-wing proponent of the proletarian arts) and Kawabata (as a modernist establishment writer supportive of Japanese literary expansion) to the cultural construction of Manchukuo becomes quite obvious (see Chapters 2 and 7).³²

Yamada, as an earlier proponent of the proletarian literature and proletarian arts movements truly believed that the arts spurred concrete political change and could create a better society through social revolution. Chairman Mao’s quote, “Revolutionary culture is a powerful revolutionary weapon for the broad masses of the people,” exemplifies these earlier attitudes of the Japanese left, to which Yamada belonged prior to his political conversion following his mid-1930s imprisonment.³³ For example, the cover of the January 1928 edition of the proletarian arts magazine *Zen’ei* (*Avant-Garde* [subheaded *Antau-Gardo* in Esperanto]), which Yamada helped initiate, asks: “How should we struggle in 1928?” And, it contains an article by the critic Kurehara Korehito on the new stage of the proletarian literature and proletarian arts movements.³⁴ Dedicated to creating a revolutionary proletarian culture, this publication, edited by Yamada, aspired to bring the arts to a level that the nominally educated working class (and even children) could understand. It did this by including proletarian children’s literature, woodblock prints, political cartoons, instructive songs, and theoretical essays made comprehensible by *rubi* (i.e., hiragana over Japanese characters) and symbols evoking the proletariat.³⁵ The arts thus served the masses by stimulating their consciousness of new social ideals. Their own participation in this endeavour would then lead to the construction of a flourishing proletarian culture.

In a Manchukuo where, by the late 1930s, the arts were increasingly used for propaganda purposes, Yamada’s observations of Concordia Association

national meetings, and his advocacy of rural development schemes for Japanese “pioneers,” appeared little different from his earlier proletarian ideals lauding the self-determination of the working class and farmers. In the Manchukuo context, he helped to create what I term a “right-wing proletarianism” supportive of the new state, with the Concordia Association serving as a vehicle for propagating this message to the masses, along with cultural media like short stories serialized in newspapers. In many ways, Yamada’s new role in Manchukuo maintained a surprising continuity with his earlier pursuits in Japan prior to his imprisonment.

However, exactly *why* did these intellectuals devote their talents to making propaganda on behalf of Manchukuo? Were they even aware that they were serving as propagandists for a fascist state and, after 1937, promoting the wartime aims of Imperial Japan?³⁶ In connection with explaining their varying levels of support for Manchukuo, I examine what attracted formerly leftist or avant-garde Japanese writers, photographers, and artists to Manchukuo between 1932 and 1945. In the following chapters, I analyze their myriad reasons for accepting invitations for tours or sojourns in the region. Kushner posits that shared conceptions of a powerful Japanese Empire “attracted well-known writers, politicians, educators, and businessmen to imperial propaganda.”³⁷ In Manchukuo, a shared sense of participating in a process that was bringing imperial modernity to the region also motivated these individuals, with the result that their descriptions in various media attained a propaganda-like quality.

In what ways were these intellectuals collaborating with the state while furthering their own careers and political agendas? This question, which addresses personal motivations as well as political agendas, intersects with issues pertaining to the nature of propaganda in Manchukuo and to former leftists working in a fascist political context. Each of the intellectuals I examine is a progressive leader in his field, and each represents a case in which an individual chose to support a regime by making use of all the tools of mechanical reproduction available to propagate its message – printed materials (pictorials, journals, photo collections, posters), films, radio, and even art displayed in government venues in domestic Japan. These people clearly knew that the works they produced would end up in national, regional, and international venues. Here, promotion and opportunism overlapped with a desire to carry out political ideals that were impossible to achieve in the politically repressive environment of domestic Japan. Each chapter examines the reasons that led whichever cultural producer being studied to collaborate with the creation of a Japanese-led cultural enterprise in Manchukuo.

Various motives brought these individuals to Manchukuo: the ability to express similar political ideals in a different context after imprisonment for left-wing activism (Yamada, Chapter 2); curiosity about the new state while

distancing oneself from the now dangerous taint of Marxism (Fukuzawa and his colleagues, Chapter 3); commercial prerogatives (Ai Mitsu, Chapter 4); jump-starting a flagging career (Fuchikami, Chapter 5); the desire to advance one's career while creating a new culture under corporatist ideals (Mutô, Chapter 6); and the opportunity to serve as a literary establishment leader for Manchukuo (Kawabata, Chapter 7). For these various reasons, each intellectual made a conscious choice either to travel to Manchukuo or to sojourn there: none was compelled to go or forced to depict the new state once he got there. However, they all believed that a multifaceted utopia was taking shape in a modernizing Manchukuo – a place where their personal aims could be realized and where, by virtue of their being Japanese, they held a privileged position. Therefore, one cannot conclusively apply a Marxist analysis of “false consciousness,” the result of a hierarchical system of state-imposed propaganda wherein ideology filters downwards without being affected by the agency of those encountering it. Rather, these Japanese intellectuals consciously and conscientiously chose to depict messages and images that resonated with their own personal aims. This culminated in a form of cultural production that communicated a kind of “soft” propaganda.

In what follows, I argue that, by persuading the left-oriented avant-garde to create positive accounts of the state's progressive campaign to modernize Manchuria for a Japanese (and foreign) audience, the Japanese handlers of the Manchukuo experiment fought an ideological soft war of suasion in support of Japan's imperialist expansion in, and development of, Asia. Most importantly, the writings and images produced by these formerly left-wing intellectuals reflect the contradictions and selective omissions that characterize historical Japanese representations of the colonies in the interwar and wartime periods.

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