“Electric Lantern Pictures”

In 1899, a screening of foreign motion pictures made its way to Taiwan. The island was under Japanese colonial rule at that time. The Taiwan Daily News (Taiwan nichinichi shimpō), then the most widely circulated newspaper, reported this screening event in Chinese:

A person from the Fushi Company, name unknown, purchased a “Western electric-lantern picture machine” from abroad and brought it to Taipei. It was exhibited and played at Luzhujiao District, Dadaocheng. Audiences from all over the place had to pay 0.15 Silver for a ticket to the show. The show ran for a month, and its earnings were not bad. Yesterday, the show relocated to a venue at Old District, Báng-kah. The ticket price was down to 0.1 Silver per visit; half price for children. Nevertheless, not many visitors came because the show had already played for quite a while at Dadaocheng; even people at Báng-kah had gone to see it. In addition, the show was similar to the magic lantern shows—the only difference was that the projected figures were movable, which was not that new or interesting.¹

Entitled, “Electric Lantern Pictures” (Diandeng yingxi), this news account carries many vague messages that raise a number of questions on Taiwan’s early film history. First of all, what exactly was the “Western electric-lantern
picture machine” featured in this article, and what were the images that the screening showed to the public at that time? Who brought the machine—and from where—to Taiwan? Why did the person organize the public screenings mainly, if not merely, in Dadaocheng and Báng-kah—Taiwanese neighborhoods instead of Japanese districts—while the report of the event only appeared in the “Chinese section” of the colonial newspaper, the major language of which was Japanese? Finally, but not least of all, what might be implied from the last sentence of this piece of news, which compares the modernity of a film screening with magic lantern shows?

The news account “Electric Lantern Pictures” is frequently mentioned in contemporary research on Taiwan’s colonial film history. Scholars consider this account a piece of evidence that potentially points to the earliest film screenings in colonial Taiwan (1895–1945) and have proposed several hypotheses on the details of the screening. For instance, film historian Huang Jen compared news accounts during the same period of time and found another screening event similar to the ones described in “Electric Lantern Pictures.” The new material located by Huang was also from the Taiwan Daily News, entitled “Western Drama, Grand Magic Lantern,” seen in the advertisement column of the Japanese section in mixed Chinese-Japanese style. According to the ad, published approximately one month before the “Electric Lantern Pictures,” the screening of “Western Drama” also took place in the Luzhujiiao District, Dadaocheng. In other words, information from “Western Drama” seems to correspond with “Electric Lantern Pictures,” as both accounts point to the screenings that featured Western moving images at Dadaocheng in August 1899. Huang thus infers that “Western Drama” (August 4, 1899) and “Electric Lantern Pictures” (September 5, 1899) described the same set of motion pictures, while the former only exhibited at Dadaocheng and the latter were seen at both Dadaocheng and Báng-kah. With this exciting find, Huang went on to excavate another screening record, “Motion Pictures at the Cross Theater,” which featured Thomas Edison’s The Spanish-American War and other films at the Cross Theater in Taipei on September 8, 1899. In Huang’s opinion, the screenings in Dadaocheng, Báng-kah, and the Cross Theater could be of the same film materials, that is, the screening contents in “Electric Lantern Pictures” might include The Spanish-American War, and thus the “Western electric-lantern picture machine” mentioned in the news account might be the Vitascope made by the Edison Manufacturing Company. Huang’s research sheds new light on
Taiwan’s early film history. Yet, due to the lack of further evidence to confirm the connection between the events in Dadaocheng and the Cross Theater, it is difficult to prove Huang’s theory.

Film scholar Lee Daw-Ming further discusses the three news accounts mentioned in Huang’s research and proposes more hypotheses. Countering Huang’s argument, Lee questions the connection between Edison’s Vitascope and the “Western electric-lantern picture machine.”3 According to Lee, the audiences at the Cross Theater would be mainly Japanese, while Dadaocheng and Báng-kah were districts frequented by the Taiwanese people. The segregated culture in colonial Taiwan made it almost impossible to share the same screening materials between Dadaocheng, Báng-kah, and the Cross Theater. In addition, Lee considers it unlikely that the Taiwanese would have the chance to see new films earlier than Japanese audiences. Thus, in Lee’s opinion, there seems to be no connection between the Cross Theater’s Edison films and the “Electric Lantern Pictures,” despite the fact that the Taiwan Daily News reported both screenings during September 1899. Nevertheless, Lee agrees that the machine introduced in Dadaocheng and Báng-kah was a type of film projector. In Lee’s revision of Huang’s theory, “Western Drama” and “Electric Lantern Pictures” concern the same materials in their screenings, which were different from the ones described in “Motion Pictures at the Cross Theater.” With his new perspective on the materials, Lee follows a clue in “Western Drama,” which notes “Zhang Boju (Cantonese)” as the projectionist of the screening event. Lee thereafter develops several hypotheses on the interactions of film activities between colonial Taiwan, Hong Kong, Japan, China, and Indochina during the late nineteenth century. Yet, as Lee states, more evidence to support his hypotheses is yet to be found. At this point, research on “Electric Lantern Pictures” and its relation to Taiwan’s film history comes to an impasse.

To date, many questions concerning early cinema in colonial Taiwan—when, by whom, and how the first film screening took place—remain unresolved. Facts are limited and difficult to locate. The scarcity of film materials and historical evidence makes the subject a challenge to researchers, not to mention that remaining records might well be problematic, since collectable materials had to survive the strict censorship in colonial and postwar martial-law periods. For instance, the Taiwan Daily News, the venue that published “Electric Lantern Pictures,” was primarily Japanese-sponsored
and thus seen by many as the mouthpiece of the colonial administration. Yet since this newspaper received stable financial and governmental support at its time, it was also the most long-lived press in colonial Taiwan and one of the richest cultural archives for postcolonial research.

Besides the insufficiency of colonial archives, there is another challenge in configuring Taiwan’s prewar film history, which concerns the dire circumstances under which the domestic film industry labored during the Japanese colonial period. A review of previous scholarship shows that, compared to works by Japanese filmmakers, records of locally made cinema in Taiwan are sporadic to nonexistent. Calling it the paradoxical condition in composing film history, Guo-Juin Hong, in his *Taiwan Cinema: A Contested Nation on Screen*, thus characterizes the history of cinema in colonial Taiwan as “film history without film.” Nevertheless, Hong provides his keen observations:

> Three important aspects of Taiwan’s cinema in the colonial period warrant further attention: the role of the *benzi* (commentators of silent films, the equivalent of Japanese cinema’s *benshi*); traveling exhibitions; and imported films (from China, especially Shanghai, as well as from elsewhere around the globe).4

The culture of *benshi*, traveling exhibitions, and imported films are indeed significant aspects of Taiwan’s colonial film culture. Building on Hong’s observations, this chapter will further point out that these aspects, especially the culture of *benshi*, were not merely pertinent to film per se but also deeply connected to the magic lantern shows, the screen practice mentioned in “Electric Lantern Pictures” in the *Taiwan Daily News*.

All three of Hong’s aspects of film culture in colonial Taiwan had connections with the practice of magic lantern shows. The *benshi*, the onsite narrator for projected images during public screenings, already existed in Japanese magic lantern shows before the emergence of cinema.5 Traveling exhibition was a convention of magic lantern practice. Moreover, in terms of imported films, the transnational network that made possible the border-crossing distribution of cinema had taken shape since the circulation of magic lantern materials. Therefore, it is important to reconstruct the context of screen culture in colonial Taiwan that made possible the comment on modernity in “Electric Lantern Pictures,” as the news account implied the existence of a contested screen practice between magic lantern shows and early film screenings at that time.
According to extant historical records, magic lantern shows and early film screenings developed in colonial Taiwan almost simultaneously, as their earliest records both appeared during the last five years of the nineteenth century. Japanese magic lantern shows became a frequent screen practice in Taiwan during the early years of colonization. The magic lantern show in colonial Taiwan was a public screen practice of modern education, science, and a new form of entertainment, but more fundamentally, it was an effective media of modern colonial power. Different from the magic lantern show in Europe, Japan, and China that had its own course of development before the emergence of cinema, the magic lantern show in Taiwan was an instrument of colonial assimilation, introduced by the Japanese administration soon after 1895 and thenceforth coexisting with the development of early, colonial film culture.

The Japanese-refashioned, colonial-distributed magic lantern shows played an important role in the film culture of colonial Taiwan, not only preceding but also intervening in the culture of film screenings at that time. The history of magic lantern shows would help us understand more on the development of cinema in colonial Taiwan. Particularly in colonial Taiwan, the relationship between magic lantern shows and cinema was not causal and linear. It might not be the case that magic lantern shows “prepared the foundation for cinema” (as commonly understood in film historiography); instead, in colonial Taiwan the magic lanterns and motion pictures developed during nearly the same period of time, while each medium contested and refashioned the other. In colonial Taiwan, the magic lantern shows were not only “prefilmic” but also intersected film practice in both the periods of early cinema (1890s–1910s) and wartime cinema (mid-1930s–1940s).

The practice of magic lantern shows was a part of the establishment of modern screen culture in colonial Taiwan, as a complex result of the expansion of, and the competition between, Japanese and Western empires. By engaging magic lantern studies in the research of colonial film history, this chapter aims to, on one hand, propose new approach to the diverse context of Taiwan’s colonial film history, and, on the other hand, contribute to the underexplored colonial legacies in the study of early cinema. In the following sections, I will discuss issues of screen modernity, cultural assimilation, colonial screen practice, and wartime discourses evoked by the magic lantern shows in Taiwan during the Japanese ruling period.
SCREEN MODERNITY

The study of magic lantern shows is currently most developed in Western and Japanese scholarship. In both contexts, the modern screen practice is considered a key connection between magic lantern shows and early film screenings. The screen modernity of magic lantern shows influenced how early cinema was then conceptualized and practiced, from the structure of the show, the role of showman or image narrator, to the modern contents on the public screen. What is more, the screen modernity inextricably intertwined with the development of imperial power during the same period of time and played a role in Japan’s colonial control of Taiwan.

The magic lantern show establishes the modernity of screen culture after the “demystification of the screen” in Europe during the seventeenth century. Charles Musser, in his seminal article, “Toward a History of Screen Practice,” identifies the magic lantern as an alternate beginning of cinema. Musser marks Athanasius Kircher’s (1602–1680) “catoptric lamp” and his “militant stance toward the demystification of the projected image” as a decisive starting point for modern screen practice. According to Musser, Kircher’s idea of lantern projection eventually contributed to the cultivation of the modern spectator, the observer who would view the projected images as art instead of magic, “as life-like, not as life itself.” The modern screen practice in magic lantern shows prepares the foundation for later film screenings, in which the relationship between producer, image, and audience “has remained fundamentally unaltered.”

A strong similarity is found between the screen practice in magic lantern shows and early motion pictures, despite the difference of their technological models. In the same article, Musser points out that the moving picture machine is historically understood as a modified lantern device. For instance, in 1898, C. Francis Jenkins described the early film machine as “a lantern equipped with a mechanical slide changer.” Musser thus situates cinema “within a larger context of screen history,” and notes, “A history of screen practice presents cinema as a continuation and transformation of magic lantern traditions in which showmen displayed images on screen, accompanying them with voice, music and sound effects.” It is imperative to mention here that the unaltered screen practice in magic lantern shows and early cinema is not only exclusively seen in the Western context but also in Japanese and East Asian visual culture.
The Meiji period is a significant historical moment for modern magic lantern practice in Japan. Iwamoto Kenji, in *Centuries of Magic Lantern in Japan: A History of Visual Culture on the Eve of Cinema*, parallels Western magic lantern history with the development of gentō, the Japanese magic lantern. In the Western section of *Centuries of Magic Lantern in Japan*, Iwamoto traces the history of magic lanterns back to seventeenth-century Europe, where Athanasius Kircher and Christiaan Huygens (1629–1695) were among the early inventors of lantern projections. The magic lanterns gave rise to the popularity of phantasmagoria in Europe during the late eighteenth century, which involved projecting images such as ghosts and skeletons in a theatrical setting of entertainment. Then, in the Japanese section of the book, Iwamoto considers the exhibition of spine-chillers in *utsushi-e* (Japanese projection-image) during the late Edo period a practice similar to European phantasmagoria. Later, during the Meiji Restoration, an imported, advanced model of a Western magic lantern device was introduced to Japan. Different from *utsushi-e*, which featured Japanese phantasmagoria and uncanny optical attractions, the new magic lantern shows, called gentō-kai, were scientific, educational demonstrations of modern pictures. During the second half of the nineteenth century, the gentō-kai, as an instrument of the civilization and enlightenment movement (*bunmei kaika*) in Meiji Japan, played a significant role in the modernization of Japanese screen culture. The culture of gentō-kai, as a refashion of traditional *utsushi-e* with new technical models and ideas during the Meiji period, was not only modern but also popular nationwide. The popularity of gentō-kai became a “lantern fever,” especially in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, widely available for education and entertainment in public spaces such as schoolyards, playhouses, temples, and shrines.

Similar to Musser’s observation on an unaltered screen practice in Western magic lanterns and early cinema, the gentō-kai and early silent films in Japan also shared a structure of practice that involved the showman’s instruction and various forms of sound performance (such as voice and music) during screenings. The showman in gentō-kai is called the benshi, the image narrator who also played an active role in Japanese silent film era. The benshi, as an onsite image narrator, directs the audience’s attention to important images and ideas during the magic lantern show. In many cases, the benshi also becomes the attraction of the show. For instance, Ryo Okubo describes the effective performance of benshi during a magic lantern show that featured Sino-Japanese War themes:
The role of the *benshi* is not just a narrator in the show. His enthusiastic talk directly affects the spectators’ emotions and makes them shed tears or get angry. Because of the integration of the *benshi*’s skillful voice performance and the visual stimulus aroused by the lantern images, spectators devoted themselves to the show and were involved in the spectacle.\(^{13}\)

Serving an active and effective role during lantern fever, the *benshi* significantly contributed to the popularity and modernity of Japanese *gentō-kai*. As part of the visual (and audio) attraction that delivered new ideas of the time in modern image projections, the instruction and performance of the *benshi* helped popularize Japanese magic lantern shows, in the screenings of news, scientific demonstrations, education, entertainment, and even war-themed images to the common public.

In colonial Taiwan, the earliest reception of Japanese *gentō-kai* was also during the period of Meiji lantern fever, the peak of Japan’s modern lantern practice. What is different, however, is that such screen modernity in Taiwan is less of a continuation of established visual traditions than a colonial transplantation. There seem to be no records of mechanical projection (such as Japanese *utsushi-e*) in the Taiwanese context before the introduction of Japanese *gentō-kai*. The demystification of the screen in Taiwan’s magic lantern shows, as the following sections will demonstrate, is a screen practice complicated by modern colonialism. Many magic lantern shows in colonial Taiwan represented the Japanese administration as a modern educator of the colonized island, while the effective images, the *benshi*’s instruction, and sound performance in these shows altogether reinforced not-so-subtle colonial discourses.

**COLONIAL CULTURAL ASSIMILATION**

During the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, the magic lantern shows in Taiwan often appeared in venues of Japanese modern education. Serving for both knowledge dissemination and colonial governance, the magic lantern show carried not only new visual contents and attractions on the public screen but also missions of cultural assimilation for the Japanese empire. *Gentō-kai*, the Japanese term widely used for magic lantern show during Meiji lantern fever, is seen in a Japanese-language textbook: *Instruction for Writing Letters and Documents: Applicable to Taiwan*.\(^{14}\) Found
In lesson 5 of the textbook, gentō-kai appears in the following sentence: "Konban no gentō-kai ni osasoi kudasai" (Please let me join you to the magic lantern show tonight). In the textbook, the Japanese sample sentence appears in the upper section of the page, while the section below presents two Taiwanese translations, the first one in colloquial language and the second in written form (Figure 2.1).

A gentō-kai is a social event to participate in with others, as suggested in the context of the sample sentence in Instruction. Besides the aforementioned sentence that demonstrated the proper expression of invitation and social activities, there are also other sample sentences in lesson 5 that feature culturally specific vocabulary in a similar grammar structure, for instance, "visiting onsen (hot springs)" in the third sentence, and in the fifth sentence, "seeing the Sōkōgō (a Chinese battleship used during the First Sino-Japanese War)." The selection of vocabulary and sample sentences shows that Instruction was a textbook not only for language learning but also for Japanese cultural assimilation. Visiting hot springs has long been a cultural tradition in Japanese life, and seeing the Sōkōgō—reminds readers of a victory in war.

Figure 2.1. First page of "Lesson Five," Instruction for Writing Letters and Documents: Applicable to Taiwan, 1897. Courtesy of National Diet Library Digital Collections, Tokyo, Japan.
in Japanese history, the result of which made Taiwan Japan’s first overseas colony. According to historian Zhou Wan-Yao’s research, *Instruction* was one of the several textbooks published by the Administration of Governor General of Taiwan (GGT) to supply an early modern model of education before the establishment of a formal public school system in 1898. Known as “National Language Learning Centers” across fourteen counties in Taiwan, these centers carried the goal of teaching Japanese language and culture to Taiwanese students, whom widely ranged in age, from eight to thirty years old at that time.\(^{15}\) In such a context, gentō-kai, the new Japanese vocabulary, played a role in the empire’s assimilation plan for colonial Taiwan.

In 1915, a magic lantern show, alongside a screening of motion pictures, was held at the “Exhibition of Educational Materials at the Twentieth Anniversary of Japanese Administration.” Among the display of sample textbooks and student works from language centers, elementary schools, professional training organizations, and libraries in Taiwan and other Japanese territories (and from other countries’ colonies), the show gathered onsite a large group of people. On July 30 of the same year, the *Journal of Taiwan Education* published a photo of this screening event. The photo was among the very few visual materials that have survived from the colonial period (figure 2.2). Captured from behind the spectators, whose facial expressions were invisible to the readers of the journal, this photo made the show’s wide screen—the material destination of magic lantern and motion picture projections—the largest item in its frame. Located at the exhibition of colonial edification, the screen itself was also a trope of Japanese modern education. Regardless of projected images, the screen, as the focal point of the spectators’ gaze, exhibited its power and attraction to subjects of the colonial island.

As a Japanese screen cultural practice (which began its course of development in Japan several decades before the colonization of Taiwan), the magic lantern show was often presented to colonial Taiwan in the light of education and modern science. In 1929, the *Journal of Taiwan Police Association*, a periodical issued by the GGT, published an article introducing some optical instruments under the title of “The Essential Knowledge of Physics.” The author of the article, Hiroshi Nishimura, was a Japanese teacher at the Taipei First Girls’ High School. In this article, “The Magic Lantern Device” was introduced first, among other optical devices. With an illustration, Nishimura explains the work of a magic lantern projection (figure 2.3):
Coming from “S,” the light source focuses on the first convex lens (L1) and illuminates on painted glass slide (AB). Then, through the second convex lens (L2), a real image of that on the glass slide is formed on the screen, enlarged.16

The magic lantern in this article serves as an introductory concept for science education. Published by GGT and its police system, the article was in line with the colonial authority's self image: an educator of modern knowledge.

**EDUCATION, EXHIBITION, ENTERTAINMENT**

The magic lantern shows in colonial Taiwan were mostly active during the first decade of the twentieth century. From 1900 to 1909, the *Taiwan Daily*
News published around 126 news coverage related to the gentō-kai, which was almost twice the number of its gentō-kai reports in the following decade and more than half of its total gentō-kai news throughout the Japanese colonial period. Among them, many shows were held by the GGT and its affiliates, such as the Association of Patriotic Women, the Japanese Red Cross and its local chapters, and community leaders. These shows took place at Taiwanese public spaces, including elementary schools for Taiwanese children (kō-gakkō), temples, hospitals, and regional community centers. The target spectators of these shows were hontō-jin, the general Han inhabitants of the island, while many news reports of such shows featured the attendance of elementary school students, local farmers, laborers, and women. The number of attendees at the shows, according to newspaper records at that time, ranged from hundreds to thousands of people. Primarily seen in local Han Taiwanese neighborhoods, the shows often organized for the following purposes: common education, popularization of Japanese language, infection prevention and epidemic control (malaria in particular), earthquake information and disaster relief, knowledge about modern agriculture, religious gatherings, and wartime mobilization. From the late nineteenth century to the 1940s, these magic lantern shows, as a modern screen practice, a medium for knowledge and propaganda, and an extension of imperial governance, seemingly appeared in line with the authority’s colonial construction and Japanization in Taiwan.
Besides a majority of public, educational events for Han Taiwanese population, there were also magic lantern shows for exclusive groups, which sometimes resembled the phenomenon of colonial segregation at that time. For instance, the gentō-kai specially held for indigenous Taiwanese, the native ethnic groups of people who were discriminatively classified as banjin (savages). In colonial Taiwan, the indigenous Taiwanese had to live in separate tribal districts with strict border control, and from time to time, the colonial administration arranged sightseeing tours for indigenous groups, transporting them from tribal areas to see other parts of Taiwan (and sometimes abroad). Considering by the GGT office an effective cultural policy to “civilize” indigenous groups, the sightseeing tours themselves were a strategic visual demonstration of colonial control. The magic lantern show, as a practice of Japanese visual modernity, was sometimes held exclusively for the attendance of indigenous people during their sightseeing tours. The magic lantern shows for indigenous tours, instead of being organized by cultural departments, were often arranged by the colonial police system at the Butokuden, a Japanese martial arts training center managed by the police administration in various locales of the colony. For instance, the Taiwan Daily News reported such a show on November 5, 1904: “Last night, a magic lantern show was held at the Butokuden for the Taidong savages who currently visited the Fuchū District. There were also gramophones and music for them to experience.” Although it is unclear what kinds of images were screened at that show, the title of the news account, “Mountain Savages and Magic Lantern Show,” seems to address the contrast between the indigenous culture and Japanese culture, the colonized and the colonizer, and stereotypically, the primitive and the modern. During their viewing of the magic lantern show, the indigenous people were also exhibited to and viewed by their Others. Such magic lantern shows exhibited multi-layered power relations of seeing and being seen, while during the show, the desire and efficacy of colonial power was projected on the colonizer’s “modern” screen.

In addition to the magic lantern shows for Taiwanese and indigenous people, there were also the ones exclusively for governmental and social elites. The shows often took place at theaters or high-class clubs, attended mainly by Japanese authorities and expatriates. For instance, in 1903, by presenting a series of photographic images of international cities, a magic lantern show in Taipei took its spectators on a virtual world tour:
Held at the Tansui Hall on the 25th [of July], this magic lantern show took Taipei as its point of departure, from the Tansui Harbor to Amoy, Hong Kong, Singapore, and all around the world. It travelled back from the United States of America to Yokohama. Then, we sightsaw our long-missed, nostalgic Tokyo. The show, presented in photography with brief oral explanations, concluded by returning to Taipei. In only a bit more than two hours, the mind of the spectators took a trip around the globe. A new model of gramophone from the Hiruta Store was also presented as an additional entertainment in that evening. The show adjourned at ten o’clock at night.20

As entertainment for the elites, the show served to evoke new visual and audio experiences. Bringing together the real and the virtual, the visual and the acoustic, this magic lantern show effectively demonstrated the attraction of modern media. On the screen, real photographic images ranged widely from foreign novelties and distant hometowns to domestic neighborhoods, and it was the remediation of the show that enacted the immediacy of the images, making its local spectators transnational travelers at the very site of photo projection. The magic lantern show, as a modern screen practice, was thus a multimedia platform for new images, sound, and modes of presentation.

Despite the presentation in Taipei, the news account in Taiwan Daily News seemed to presume a Japanese spectatorship for the magic lantern show. As a matter of fact, the venue of the show, Tansui Hall, was itself a “new” space during the colonial period. Known as Dengying Academy before Japanese colonization, Tansui Hall was originally a classical Chinese academy, established in Taipei during the late Qing period. In colonial Taiwan, Governor General Kabayama Sukenori (1837–1922) renamed the place “Tansui Hall” and turned it into a club for colonial governmental officials, most of which were Japanese.21 Tansui Hall thus became a new venue for the exercise of both colonial power and modern screen practice. In addition to magic lantern entertainment, some of the earliest film screenings took place at the Tansui Hall, including the presentation of the Lumières’ works in 1900. Tansui Hall, seemingly reminiscent of and an extension of Japanese social circles in colonial Taiwan, held magic lantern shows regularly for charity, governmental entertainment, and the appreciation of photography and moving images—although in those events, Taiwanese participation was limited. The virtual world tour at Tansui Hall, featuring images and ideas
such as “nostalgic Tokyo,” was after all an exclusive entertaining program for Japanese expatriates in the colony.

WARS AND SHADOWS OF THE EMPIRE

In 1904, amid the Russo-Japanese War, a magic lantern show was held at the Fule Theater in Keelung, northern Taiwan. According to related news coverage, the show presented war-themed images, such as photography of sea battles and portraits of soldiers, arranged with “hundreds of new, fascinating images of other kinds.” Describing such images as “new and fascinating” was a common tactic in the advertisements of war-themed magic lantern shows. Through the mechanical projection of a combination of war images and other “interesting” pictures on the public screen, the magic lantern show presented news and propaganda in sensational spectacles with the benshi’s narrative and performance.

The Russo-Japanese War continued to be a theme in magic lantern shows after the end of the war. On September 12, 1905, a news account written in Chinese reported a magic lantern show at a Taiwanese elementary school in Hengchun, southern Taiwan. The reporter’s introduction of the show, and the narrative of the benshi described in the news, altogether reinforced the deliberately projected “colonial others” during the screening. According to the news, Mr. Yamakawa, a Japanese man from mainland Japan (naichi), had organized a series of “enlightening” magic lantern shows in colonial Taiwan with the support of local authorities and social elites. The shows ran for a month at the time of the news coverage on a set schedule: beginning at 7:00 o’clock in the evening, ending at midnight, seven days a week. The news also reported the images, goals, and achievements of these shows:

Despite the new, interesting, and diverse picture-projections—which were a visual pleasure to the audience—it was the images of Russo-Japanese War that indeed impressed the spectators. In Japan, everyone already knew about the war. Yet people in rural coastal Hengchun were like frogs living at the bottom of a well. Not to mention that the uneducated folks knew nothing about the war; there even were quite a few elites unaware of the news. This time, the magic lantern was able to project the real land and sea battles between Japan and Russia on the screen.
The viewers felt as though they had personally visited the very battlefields and encountered situations through their own eyes and bodies. There was also an interpreter at the show, who courteously explained in clear order the reasons why Japan won the war and Russia lost, and what the war means to the people in our country. Enlightened by the show, people felt greatly excited.23

Through its deliberate description of the images, goals, and achievements of the Japanese man’s magic lantern shows, the news report characterized the local spectators in Taiwan as ignorant folks who were “frogs living at the bottom of a well,” imperial Japan as a stronger power than Russia and a necessary educator for colonial Taiwan, and the lantern images as effective materials to realize the “enlightenment” of the empire. The information on the Russo-Japanese War was described as something to shorten the intellectual distance between the empire and its colonial subjects. Without subtlety, the news account was not simply a report of the magic lantern show, but more essentially, a medium of propaganda to legitimize war and colonialism. Here the power of a magic lantern show had to be confirmed by its effectiveness in reinforcing the power of the empire in its colony. Through the projection of lifelike war images during the show, a powerful Japan appeared in its shadowed images, substantialized by the benshi’s courteous explanations. This was an evident moment when the modernity of screen culture and the imperial practice of colonialism converged, after the creation of an enlightened spectatorship—whether such a creation was historical, ideological, or phantasmagorical.

In 1925, Taiwanese intellectuals began to tour motion picture shows around the island. The films screened in these tours mainly concerned modern knowledge and social information. Often accompanied by the instruction and performance of Taiwanese benshi, the film tours were a means of local cultivation and a screening practice of counterculture against Japanese colonial ideologies. These tours were organized by members of Taiwanese Cultural Association, many of whom grew up as the first generation in colonial Taiwan to receive modern Japanese education. The screenings operated with a theme (education and enlightenment) and a structure (public screening, benshi, and music) similar to those of earlier Japanese magic lantern and motion picture shows, and yet developed toward the construction of a Taiwanese identity (instead of the identity of “Japanese subject”), which was potentially anticolonial. The emergence of locally organized film tours in the
1920s signifies a more developed phase in Taiwan’s screen culture, when the cinema—Taiwanese-selected cinema in particular—continued and revised the screening tradition imposed by Japanese magic lantern shows and early motion pictures on the colonial island.

Yet wartime discourses facilitated a revival of magic lantern shows in colonial Taiwan, bringing the linear historiography of mechanical vision, as well as the presumptions about old and new media, into question. In the 1940s, magic lantern shows seemed to make a comeback—at least in governmental discourses with regard to the urgent need for, again, wartime propaganda at the dawn of the Pacific War. On March 12, 1941, the Taiwan Daily News reported a Japanese governmental plan to reenact magic lantern shows for sociopolitical campaigns, as a more convenient and cheaper substitute for the insufficient film equipment in rural farming and fishing villages in the Japanese empire and its extensive territories. Although the language used in the news account was not directly war-related, as it claimed the purpose of reenacting magic lanterns was “to disseminate scientific education and culture edification,” the shadow of the war was hard to ignore.

Two years later, “Magic Lantern Slides Campaign” was listed as an entry in the table of contents of an official report published in Taipei. The report showed the plans and results of the Imperial People Public Service Association, a propagandistic organization of wartime militarism in colonial Taiwan, which was equivalent to the Imperial Rule Assistance Association in Japan during the same time period. Such a revival of magic lantern shows took place not only in Taiwan but also in Japan, as Hana Washitani notes: “Gentō experienced a full revival in the early 1940s for the purpose of the [Japanese] national mobilization propaganda during the total war against the Allied Forces.” Although the war pushed Taiwan to “become Japanese” in a rapid manner, the revival of the magic lantern may have had different meanings in the colony and have led to consequences distinct from those in Japan. Washitani’s research shows that postwar Shōwa Japan continued magic lantern shows in education, entertainment, and social movements. Yet in postwar Taiwan, the culture was short-lived and gradually disappeared with the coming of another political regime led by the Chinese Nationalists, and thereafter the Taiwanese culture has undergone waves of identity reformation.

“Modernity is one and multiple.” In his article “Magic Lantern, Dark Precursor of Animation,” Thomas LaMarre makes this comment when discussing Gilles Deleuze’s conception of the ruptures and successions evoked
LaMarre’s statement might find a new interpretation in the cinematic modernity manifested by the magic lantern shows in colonial Taiwan. Although frequently described as new and fascinating, the magic lantern shows were not merely an inspiring practice in screen culture or novel visual excitement; they were also a modern medium for the exercise of colonial power. The modernity evoked by magic lantern shows was both exciting and threatening in colonial Taiwan. Taiwan’s magic lantern shows were all at once a continuation of Japanese and transnational screen tradition, a medium for modern knowledge, education, and scientific demonstration, and a practice of colonial propaganda. In pre-1945 Taiwan, the practice of magic lantern shows was a result of the convergence of screen modernity and colonial modernity. The projection of multilayered modernity and the shadows it left on the screen were the consequences of uneven power relations between the empires and their extensive territories.

A side account should be provided at this point. Reminiscent of colonial Taiwan’s 1899 news report “Electric Lantern Pictures,” in 1912, Japanese film essayist Terada Torahiko (1878–1935) stated in an article on his first film viewing experience: “[This is] the sort of experience of ‘not believing until you see it, but once you see it, you are surprised yet at the same time think it’s not out of the ordinary.’ Anyway, it seems I was not as surprised as the first time I saw gentō.”

The reason why colonial Taiwan and Japan made similar comments to compare the modernity of film screenings with magic lantern shows is curious, although it is difficult to find out who originally wrote the Chinese comment in colonial Taiwan. (Was this reporter familiar with Japanese magic lantern tradition, or did she or he experience magic lantern shows in other contexts?) In spite of the uncertainties noted above, “Electric Lantern Pictures” can be read not only as an account concerning cinema per se but also as a piece of historical evidence that reveals complicated forces and mediations of colonial screen modernity. Proposing a diverse screen culture, the study of magic lantern shows suggests a reconsideration of media historiography, which might help develop new approaches to the unresolved mysteries in the cinema of colonial Taiwan.

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Notes

1. “Diandeng yingxi” [Electric Lantern Pictures], Taiwan nichinichi shimpō, September 5, 1899, 4. For the interest of readability, here, I have translated the purchased site of the “Western electric-lantern picture machine” as “from abroad.” The original text seems to indicate the location of purchase, but due to the unclear text on the extant copy of the news page, it is difficult to identify the message.

2. The mixed language, as stated in the advertisement, intended to attract both Japanese and Taiwanese readers. Huang Jen and Wang Wei, eds., Taiwan dianying bainian shihua [One Hundred Years of Taiwan Cinema], vol. 1 (Taipei: Zhonghua yingpingren xiehui, 2004).

3. Lee Daw-Ming, “Shijiu shiji mo dianyingren zai Taiwan, Xianggang, Riben, Zhongguo yu Zhongnanbandao jian de (keneng) liudong” [The (Possible) Circulation of Movie Industry Professionals between Taiwan, Hong Kong, Japan, China, and Indo-China in the Late Nineteenth Century], in Zhongguo dianying suyuan [Chinese Cinema: Tracing the Origins], ed. Wong Ain-ling (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2011), 126–143.


9. Musser, “Toward a History,” 63. The original source discussed in Musser’s article is C. Francis Jenkins, Animated Pictures: An Exposition of the Historical Development of Chromophotography (Washington, DC: Press of H. L. McQueen, 1898), 100. Here Musser also addresses Henry V. Hopwood, “A film for projecting a living picture is nothing more, after all, than a multiple lantern slide.” The original source is Henry V. Hopwood, Living Pictures: Their History, Photoduplication and Practical Working (London: Optician and Photographic Trades Review, 1899).


14. “Dai go ka” [Lesson 5], in Shotokubun kyōjusho: Taiwan tekiyō [Instruction for Writing Letters and Documents: Applicable to Taiwan] (Tokyo: Taiwan Sôtokufu Minseikyoku Gakumubu, 1897).


17. The rough number of magic lantern news covered by the Taiwan Daily News (as sorted and counted by Laura Jo-han Wen through the digital database of the newspaper built by Tudor Tech Systems Co., Ltd): 1899: 5 accounts; 1900s: 126 accounts; 1910s: 66 accounts; 1920s: 13 accounts; 1930s: 1 account; 1940s: 2 accounts. Some magic lantern events appeared more than one time in the Taiwan Daily News, and some were published in both Japanese and Chinese sections of the newspaper.

18. “Nama-ban to gentō-kai” [Mountain Savages and Magic Lantern Show], Taiwan nichinichi shimpō, November 5, 1904, 5.


22. “Nichirosensō gentō” [Magic Lantern Show on the Russo-Japanese War], Taiwan nichinichi shimpō, April 15, 1904, 5.


24. “Gentō no riyō ga saigen” [Use of Magic Lantern Resurged], Taiwan nichinichi shimpō, March 12, 1941, 4.


