Routledge Handbook of Japanese Cinema

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Home Movies of the Revolution

Publication details

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Published online on: 10 Aug 2020

Accessed on: 15 Jun 2021

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The 1920s is a key decade for thinking about mass media, modernity, and modernism in Japan. In the 1910s and 1920s, Japan made leaps toward becoming a modern industrialized society. Although Japan did not fight in World War I, it manufactured munitions for the Allies, which helped develop heavy industry and spur rapid urbanization. This growth led to the formation of a large urban working class and a “new middle class” of urban knowledge workers (including teachers, journalists, office workers, civil servants, managers, etc.) as well as offering more opportunities for working women. The contributions of ordinary people to Japan’s modernization gave rise to movements that called for sweeping social and political reforms. These movements, such as the women’s movement and universal suffrage movement, demanded that average citizens have more opportunities to participate in government and public life. At the same time, through the exponential growth of movie theaters, magazines, and newspapers, a burgeoning popular culture introduced new ways of thinking about gender, nationality, citizenship, race, and class.

In the midst of these changes emerged the Proletarian Film League of Japan (Nihon Puroretaia Eiga Dōmei, commonly referred to as Prokino, 1929–1934), an organization dedicated to the politicization of workers and farmers and the creation of a proletarian film culture. Prokino was part of a broader proletarian movement that reflected the proliferation of new political parties, unions, women’s leagues, suffrage groups, and other political organizations in Japan. Prokino’s film activities also paralleled the rise of new currents in Japanese filmmaking, such as the development of educational, documentary, and amateur film, and the new prominence of politically engaged film theory.

An understanding of the broader proletarian movement’s institutional history is necessary for understanding Prokino’s organization, operations, and goals, since this history provides crucial political and theoretical context for Prokino’s conceptualization of cinema as a vehicle for social change.

The proletarian movement began with the literary journal *Tanemakuhito* (The Sower, 1921–1923), which folded after the September 1, 1923 Great Kantō Earthquake but was quickly succeeded by a new literary magazine called *Bungei sensen* (Literary Front, 1924–1932).1 *Literary Front* became the flagship of the first proletarian writers’ organization, the Japan Proletarian
Literary Arts League (Nihon Puroretaria Bungei Renmei, also known as Puoren or JPLAL), which existed in 1925–1926. At around this time, a variety of leftist organizations were formed by writers, artists, and intellectuals, while many established cultural organizations splintered and gave rise to new groups that formed around their more politicized members. In the second half of the 1920s, coordination increased among these various political cultural organizations. In 1928, they coalesced into the umbrella organization NAPF (from its Esperanto name, Nippona Artista Proleta Feracio), also known as the Zen Nihon Musansha Geijutsu Renmei or All-Japan Proletarian Arts Federation. NAPF quickly became more focused on direct political organizing, especially the recruiting and politicizing of factory workers and tenant farmers. It also came increasingly under the control of the Japanese Communist Party (JCP), which was considered seditious and therefore illegal, and was itself largely funded and guided by policies set by the Communist International, or Comintern. In order to better incorporate political activities, NAPF reorganized in 1931 as KOPF (in Esperanto, Federacio de Proletaj Kultur Organizoj Japanaj), also known as the Nihon Puroretaria Bunka Renmei or Japan Proletarian Culture Federation. Compared to NAPF, KOPF was far more centralized and overtly political. This arguably made KOPF more vulnerable to government persecution (Karlsson 2011; Karlsson 2015: 104–105). The arrests and torture of many members eventually led to the dissolution of KOPF and the end of the proletarian movement in 1934.

Prokino’s history reflects the growing emphasis on activism and direct political action within the broader proletarian movement. Prokino superseded the Proletarian Film Federation of Japan (Nihon Puroretaria Eiga Renmei, 1928), which was created by critics at the film journals Eiga no eiga (Film of Films, 1927–1928), Eiga kōjō (Film Factory, 1927–1928), Eiga kaihō (Film Emancipation, 1928), and Puroretaria eiga (Proletarian Film, 1928). In contrast to its predecessor’s roots in political criticism, Prokino was established in 1929 as a separate wing of NAPF after the beginnings of political filmmaking within NAPF’s Leftwing Theater (Sayoku Gekijō, 1928–1934). From its inception, Prokino focused on filmmaking and political action, although its members produced a wealth of criticism and other writings as well.

Prokino’s origins in the Leftwing Theater left a profound mark on the group. Leftwing Theater member and central Prokino figure Sasa Genjū advocated a radically new approach to cinema, pushing Prokino to adopt a hands-on approach. As a member of several proletarian theater groups, Sasa documented political actions using small-gauge film equipment intended for amateur use. Sasa completed his first film, Mē dē (May Day), in 1927 on 9.5 mm film when he was still a member of the Trunk Theater (Toranku Gekijō) in the Japan Proletarian Literary Arts League (Puoren, 1925–1926). Puoren later reorganized as the Proletarian Art Federation of Japan (Nihon Puroretaria Geijutsu Renmei or Progei, 1926–1928) and combined with the Vanguard Artists League (Zen’ei Geijutsuka Dōmei) in 1928 to create NAPF, at which point Progei’s Proletarian Theater (Puroretaria Gekijō) and the Vanguard Theater (Zen’ei Geijutsuka Dōmei’s Zen’ei Gekijō) merged to form the Leftwing Theater.

As a filmmaker, Sasa adopted tactics used by activist theater groups. Puoren’s Trunk Theater specialized in touring factories and performing for workers during their breaks. In 1928, as part of the Trunk Theater, Sasa made short films documenting workers’ activities: Teidai nyūsu (Tokyo University News), Sutoraiki (Strike), and Gaitō (On the Street) on 16 mm, and Noda sōgi (Noda Strike) on 9.5 mm film (Makino 2001: 5–6). These films were then screened for workers in their communities. Although none of Sasa’s 1927–1928 films survive today, there are descriptions of the films from various sources that tell us how the films were shot and where they were projected, indicating that farmers and workers were the intended audience for these films.

During the five years of its existence from 1929 to 1934, Prokino made a total of forty-eight films in Tokyo, Kyoto, Osaka, Okayama, Kanazawa, and Sapporo. According to police records,
at the height of Prokino’s activities in 1931, the movement held anywhere between two to seven events per month in different parts of the country, drawing approximately 21 to 2,400 audience members per event (Nornes 2003: 37). Most of Prokino’s films were shot on reversal film, which yields a unique positive print from the camera original, so that there is only one print and no negative. These unique prints were circulated until they were too scratched and battered to project, which is why only fragments of a handful of films survive today. Sasa’s model and material constraints dictated that films were made and exhibited using small-gauge equipment developed for the amateur market, such as the Pathé Baby (9.5 mm) and the Cine-Kodak BB (16 mm) systems. Mobile film units took Prokino films to farming villages and factories, where farmers and workers could watch themselves (or people like them) on the screen in films of funerals, celebrations, rallies, strikes, and everyday work scenes.

In a sense, Prokino’s films were the home movies of the proletariat. Prokino wanted politicized workers and farmers to recognize themselves as both the subject of, and audience for, their films. In the process, Prokino hoped to contribute to the overthrow of Japan’s capitalist imperialism by awakening the proletariat’s revolutionary consciousness. Its goal was to have workers and farmers develop a critical understanding of themselves as participants in the movement and the filmmaking process. Thus, Prokino aspired to more than simply introducing representations of workers and farmers into movies as objects of cinematic representation.

Prokino’s history sheds light on a variety of vital aesthetic, technological, and socio-political issues in late 1920s and early 1930s Japanese film culture. At the same time, perhaps the most useful contexts for understanding Prokino are also among the least appreciated and understudied areas of film history: the global histories of educational film, amateur film, industrial film, and sponsored film. Film scholars have attempted to raise the visibility of these diverse but related forms of filmmaking by analyzing a variety of non-commercial and sponsored filmmaking practices under the rubrics “nontheatrical film and media” and “useful film.” Careful study of Prokino’s activities and its social network illuminates the overlapping histories of these often overlooked cinematic forms while also providing crucial insights into Japan’s interwar socio-political transformations and the geopolitics of the Japanese empire. In this chapter, I will focus on the emphasis on direct action and political organizing within Prokino as well as within the broader proletarian movement. Accordingly, I will primarily discuss Prokino’s filmmaking efforts in light of their theories and strategies of grassroots organizing and counter-mobilization, which were developed to combat the state’s own mobilization efforts during the same period. Prokino members’ emphasis on grassroots organizing and their internal debates on strategy and theory were informed by the umbrella movement’s policies, policies that by the early 1930s were largely shaped by Comintern. These connections between Prokino and the greater movement, and the greater movement and Comintern, only become visible with close attention to Prokino’s institutional history and the politics of the so-called “Bolshevization period” of roughly 1931–1934. The main goal of this chapter is to introduce Bolshevikization (also known as taishūka, “popularization” or “massification”) as an essential context for understanding Prokino’s strategy of using filmmaking, film circles, and film screenings to foster connections among artists, activists, workers, and farmers and thereby create a “mobilization network” (dōinmō) for political actions.

The Bolshevization period

In the 1931 essay, “Puroretaria geijutsu undō no soshiki mondai” (“The Question of the Organization of the Proletarian Arts Movement”), writer Kurahara Korehito, the leading theorist of the proletarian movement, argued that NAPF should prioritize its “organizational influence”
over its “ideological influence” (Nornes 2003: 43). Kurahara was responding to Comintern’s “Theses on Japan” (1927), which reprimanded Japanese activists for becoming overly absorbed in factional debates over Marxist theory (Nornes 2003: 43). As a corrective, during the so-called “Bolshevization period,” the Japanese movement shifted attention to spreading proletarian consciousness among the masses by increasing direct contact between farmers, workers, and activists, and encouraging them to organize themselves. In this period, Prokino leveraged many different aspects of filmmaking and film culture in the hope of establishing a broad-based, participatory political network for revolutionary struggle. Prokino’s strategies included film education, factory and farm village screenings, film publications, embedded cameramen, and the creation of factory and farm village film organizations. From 1931 to 1934, Prokino both increased its film output as well as paying more attention to the problem of grassroots organizing.

Among Prokino’s members, Namiki Shinsaku was especially vocal about the need for mobile film units and ad hoc screenings to encourage the formation of self-organized worker and farmer groups that could partner with Prokino. Namiki argued that having allies within communities would enable Prokino to better plan activities, delegate resources, and respond quickly and effectively to challenges as they arose. In keeping with the movement’s turn toward Bolshevization, he conceived these on-the-ground activities as a “grassroots insurgency” or nichijōteki mochikomi, literally “everyday interventions” or a “smuggling [of politics] into the everyday.” Although Namiki has not achieved the fame of some of his peers in Prokino, such as Iwasaki Akira and Sasa Genjū, he deserves to be recognized as one of the principle architects of Prokino’s Bolshevization strategies.

Comintern’s “Theses on Japan” were instrumental to this shift within the Japanese proletarian movement, however, the new emphasis on nichijōteki mochikomi and taishūka was not simply imposed by Comintern. Rather, Prokino’s writings suggest that many of the strategies that nichijōteki mochikomi involved were conceived in response to the Japanese state’s own campaigns of “education mobilization” (kyōka sōdōin) and “thought rectification” (shisō zendō). In these campaigns, the Home Ministry and the Education Ministry marshaled locally based community organizations such as youth groups (seinendan), block associations (chōnaikai), and neighborhood associations (tonarigumi), in an attempt to win hearts and minds, and to delegate civic and moral education, as well as anti-leftist surveillance, to citizens in the community. In the years that Prokino operated, highly educated specialist bureaucrats in the Home Ministry and the Special Higher Police paid increasing attention to social management. These “reform bureaucrats” (kakushin kanryō) not only believed in social progress but also in the perfectibility of society through social and cultural intervention (High 2003: 86–87). Their bureaucratic interventions into the everyday lives of ordinary citizens mobilized existing community groups or encouraged the formation of new local organizations to carry out state-initiated campaigns of moral education and “daily life improvement” (seikatsu kaizen). For the state, the primary economic and political benefits of these initiatives were that they reduced the government’s own expenditures on social welfare and poor relief, effectively addressed forms of social dislocation created by capitalism and urbanization, and helped contain the spread of “dangerous thoughts” (kiken shisō) (Akazawa 1985: 18; Garon 1998: 38). As Sandra Wilson notes,

while the state in the early 1930s was undeniably an increasingly repressive one, it was not exclusively concerned with repression, but in addition expended much energy on providing channels for political and social activity that would further its own aims and at the same time weaken the appeal of radical ideologies.

(Wilson 1997: 102)
Although moral education pre-dates the 1920s (for instance, it was encouraged by Meiji era [1868–1912] modernizers), the number and variety of community groups aimed at moral suasion proliferated rapidly from the decade beginning in World War I until the mid-1920s (Akazawa 1985: 23), laying a foundation for wartime mobilization in the 1930s.

Two important examples of government-led moral suasion campaigns are the Home Ministry’s Campaign for the Cultivation of National Strength (Minryoku Kanyō Undō, launched in March 1919) and the Education Ministry’s Lifestyle Improvement Campaign (Seikatsu Kaizen Undō, launched in 1920). The Campaign for the Cultivation of National Strength encouraged thrift, even though real wages and household budget expenditures were actually increasing. The campaign attempted to inculcate national values and ideals by encouraging the observation of national holidays and homogenizing religious practices across Japan. It also endorsed compulsory savings (kyōsei chokin) and the rice consumption reduction campaign (setsumai undō), which were believed to ease the social tensions caused by rice shortages, thus reducing the frequency of rice riots and discouraging left-wing political organizing.

The Campaign for the Cultivation of National Strength was a reactionary response to the social transformations taking place after World War I. As Akazawa Shirō points out, this campaign was unique in placing special emphasis on horizontal relations between countrymen, as opposed to the vertical relationships that are typically emphasized in Japanese society. In addition, Akazawa observes, the operative term in the campaign was not “the strength of the nation” (kokuryoku) but rather “the strength of the people” (minryoku), and the concept that received the most emphasis in the campaign was jichi or “self-governance” (Akazawa 1985: 18). This suggests that the Campaign for the Cultivation of National Strength appropriated the very notions of self-determination and greater political participation that were championed by the universal suffrage movement, which was at its height at the time. “Self-governance” placed emphasis on the individual’s civic duty and was used to cultivate the individual’s responsibility to the state, regardless of that individual’s position within the hierarchies of their local community.

The Home Ministry’s campaigns relied on intermediaries—youth groups, military reservists’ associations, and notably, reformers from the emerging middle class—to carry out its programs (Garon 1998: 25–59). One of the central principles of the Federation of Moral Suasion Groups was that each organization had autonomy to determine the methods used to carry out the Imperial Rescripts (Akazawa 1985: 23). When compared to the implementation of the 1890 Imperial Rescript Regarding Education (Kyōiku ni kansuru chokugo), which was read daily to children in schools, it is clear that these efforts greatly expanded the reach of moral education beyond the classroom.

Not unlike the emergence of left-wing political organizations and new religions, the state’s grassroots efforts were in part a response to the spread of capitalism and the strains of rapid modernization (Akazawa 1985: 16). At the same time, state bureaucrats and industrialists were also influenced by modern scientific management principles, such as Taylorism. As William Tsutsui writes, “Taylorism lay at the intellectual core of a spreading technocratic humor, an emergent bureaucratic authoritarianism which culminated in the wartime ‘New Order’ of statist economic management” (Tsutsui 1998: 11). Nevertheless, bureaucrats and factory owners found that their attempts to create more rational, efficient, and hierarchical forms of social organization often backfired. Scientific management principles exacerbated tensions between workers and foremen, while the state’s efforts to create a more educated and civic-minded populace created workers who were more likely to challenge hierarchies within the workplace. Tsutsui argues that these contradictions contributed to the growth of the labor movement and led to the introduction of paternalistic or familistic industrial management practices in Japanese workplaces as a palliative measure. Paternalistic or familistic practices might seem antithetical to Taylorism but,
in fact, they complemented it (Tsutsui 1998, and 1997). Indeed, Prokino publications make frequent references to paternalistic labor management practices as a major impediment to the political organization of workers. For instance, when Namiki argues for public film events as well as ad hoc factory screenings, he uses the example of a large mill where it may be impossible to reach the female workers, even with the assistance of the labor union, due to the domineering paternalism of the factory owner (Namiki 1931: 150). As Prokino’s efforts often targeted state-directed grassroots mobilization efforts, they may be envisioned as strategies of counter-mobilization. Beyond aesthetic or political-philosophical reasons for developing alternative film practices (including directives from Comintern), key local factors (such as moral suasion campaigns and factory paternalism) influenced Prokino’s grassroots approach to filmmaking and exhibition.

Because of state mobilization campaigns, Prokino members not only faced direct censorship and government suppression resulting from Communist persecution and other anti-leftist tactics, but they also faced resistance from communities, workers, and farmers. As Prokino member Uemura Shūkichi wrote in July 1930,

the capitalist landlords are mobilizing every conceivable measure in an attempt to XX us, going to the lengths of XX from above and enlightenment mobilization (kyōka sōdōin) from below in order to crush the struggle of the workers and farmers.

(Uemura 1930: 165)

In “Puroretaria eiga no jōei keitai” (“The Form of Proletarian Film Exhibition”), Namiki Shin-saku wrote,

Cinema that is used deliberately [by the state] as an instrument for enlightenment is not aimed at the crowds that go to movie theaters as its primary target audience. Cunning bourgeois educators understand this very well. We remember the huge fuss made over so-called “thought rectification” (shisō zendō) last fall, for which there was an enlightenment mobilization (kyōka sōdōin). We also remember very well how one of the reactionary films mobilized for this purpose was generally shown to school youth groups rather than at commercial movie theaters. What precisely is the significance of this?

It goes without saying. Schools and youth groups served as “fortresses” for bourgeois education.

... We have to take proletarian films to the places where workers (or farmers) have group consciousness and group feelings (shūdan to shite no ishiki, kanjō).

(Namiki 1930b: 162–163)

In order to compete directly with the Home Ministry and Education Ministry’s mobilization campaigns, Prokino developed specific tactics—mobile film units and ad hoc screenings—to combat the state’s ideological and organizational strategies.

**Organization structure and equipment**

Prokino relied on small teams (and sometimes individuals working alone) to travel into communities with film equipment to spread information about the movement, collect information about local labor conditions, and conduct film activities. These teams were called the “mobile
film units” (idō eigata). Their irregular and extemporary activities allowed Prokino to pursue different aims than those best served by planned events in public venues. According to Namiki, mobile film units carried out the “most Bolshevik activity in the arts movement” by increasing contact between Prokino and workers and farmers, whereas public screenings were more suitable for bringing proletarian culture to the general public as well as assisting with public relations and fund-raising (Namiki 1931: 150). As a vehicle for Bolshevization—bringing intellectuals closer to the masses and delegating more political responsibility to workers and farmers—the mobile film units were used to grow the organization. Namiki argued, “Ultimately, this stage is one that we must inevitably pass through in order to make our movement the proletariat’s” (Namiki 1931: 162).

A 1930 diagram of Prokino’s infrastructure outlines the organizational structure of the Tokyo and Kyoto branches, the only branches for which film production was feasible at that time (Matsuzaki 1930: 157). The diagram shows exhibition divided into separate departments for “mobile” and “public” screenings. The filming bureau is divided into fiction film (engi eiga) and culture film units, with the latter consisting of a culture film squad and a news squad. These distinctions indicate how divisions between regular and contingent film activities were built into Prokino’s very organizational structure, with contingent film activities (mobile film unit screenings, news film production, etc.) more closely related to political actions or political organizing.

Unfortunately, limited access to equipment made it a challenge for Prokino to carry out any routine film production and exhibition activities. Whether or not a cameraman could be dispatched on short notice often depended on the availability of a camera. Prokino only owned a few pieces of equipment, and it was not always possible to locate a camera straightaway (Namiki 1930a: 30).

According to Markus Nornes, “In addition to Sasa’s Pathé Baby, Iwasaki [Akira] purchased a CineKodak BB with his writing fees and, together with Kanda Kazuo (who borrowed cash from his family), also bought a Palbo L 35 mm camera” (Nornes 2003: 35). In a 1994 interview, former Prokino member Noto Setsuo says that although 16 mm cameras and projectors could be borrowed from a rental store, these were such important “weapons” that Prokino ultimately collected donations to buy their own equipment (Komori and Noto 1994). Prokino solicited funds for its activities through the Friends of Prokino Association (Prokino Tomo no Kai).

Besides members of Prokino and the proletarian arts movement (such as Sasaki Takamaru, Murayama Tomoyoshi, Nakano Shigeharu, Kobayashi Takiji, Kurahara Korehito, and Akita Ujaku), Prokino’s donors included famous writers, critics, and artists with a range of political affiliations (Kataoka Teppei, Ōya Sōichi, Nagata Mikihiko, Kitagawa Fuyuhiko, and Hijikata Yoshi), as well as actors and directors from major commercial film studios (Itō Daisuke, Okada Tokihiko, Mizoguchi Kenji, Suzuki Denmei, Ushihara Kiyohiko, and Suzuki Shigeyoshi) (Takada 1930: 83).

Proletarian Film (September 1930) carried a plea for equipment donations that claimed that Prokino did not own any of its own equipment, although articles in the same issue that mention Sasa’s 9.5 mm camera contradict this assertion. Here, too, as in other essays and statements issued by Prokino, the need for ad hoc film activities and the importance of Bolshevization are given special emphasis.

Soliciting!! Film projectors, film cameras, and still photography cameras.

All militant amateurs, cinemasts, and photographers, from all over the country!

Since the 1930 Annual Meeting, Prokino, Japan’s sole XXteki [revolutionary] film organization, has taken a sharp turn and is embarking on the path to Bolshevization.
The newsreel unit, the mobile projection unit, and the still photography unit are making themselves busy in the factory regions, day and night.

However, we do not yet possess a single film camera, projector, or camera. Accordingly, our daily struggle has severe limitations.

We cannot express how frustrated we are with our daily actions. However, there is nothing we can do about this frustration until we get our hands on equipment.

All militant amateurs, cinemasts, and photographers, from all over the country! Prokino sincerely awaits your support.

Your donation of equipment to Prokino will advance the Japanese film movement forward from one step to two steps—no, ten steps forward. We ask you reluctantly part with equipment that is no longer of any use to you, or equipment that you are using, and donate it for the sake of the Japanese proletarian film movement.

Proletarian Film League of Japan
Located in the Senki Co.
1–6 Uchisaiaiwaichō, Kōjimachi Ward [present-day Chiyoda Ward], Tokyo.

Prokino also conserved finances by living communally and utilizing other social and material resources (Nornes 2003: 34–35). Thanks to fundraising efforts, the Tokyo branch seems to have had adequate access to film stock and even established its own developing lab. By 1932, the group was becoming increasingly ambitious. In a fundraising campaign, in February 1932, Prokino sent out mimeographed letters announcing a 3,000-yen pledge drive for 35 mm equipment. The letter explains Prokino’s plans to move on from making 16 mm films. Two scenarios were to be filmed in 35 mm: Nobiyuku joseisen (The Advancing Women’s Front), about female bus drivers’ labor disputes, and an animated film titled Sankichi no kūchū ryokō (Sankichi’s Aerial Voyage).

During the five years that Prokino was engaged in film production, its total output amounted to eleven newsreels, nineteen films of incident reportage, twelve documentaries, two fiction films, two agitprop films, an animation film, and a film that incorporated both animation and live action. These films were made by the Tokyo branch (thirty-six films), the Kyoto branch (five films), and the Okuyama branch (two films), while the Osaka, Kanagawa, Kanezawa, and Sapporo branches produced one film each, and the Osaka and Tokyo branches collaborated on one co-production (Nornes 2003: 37).

Internal debates on Bolshevization and the mobile film unit

For the first two years of Prokino’s existence, mobile film projection activities were limited to the Tokyo main branch and one or two other regions (Namiki 1931: 162). Mobile filmmaking activities were similarly circumscribed, with no branch coming close to the Tokyo branch’s capacity to engage in film production on a regular basis. Despite the Tokyo and Kyoto branches’ clear organizational structure, which included distinct departments for mobile film projection and newsreel production (discussed above), Prokino members remained divided in their understanding of the groups’ tactics, as well as on the significance of mobile film units in comparison to other filmmaking and exhibition practices, two years into the organization’s existence.

Iwasaki Akira alluded to these internal struggles in the summer of 1930, when, writing about the challenges facing Prokino in the essay “Puroretaria eiga no taishūka to sono genjitsusei” (“The Massification of Proletarian Film in Theory and Practice”), he made reference to the massification (Bolshevization) debates (Iwasaki 1930). Iwasaki is perhaps the most famous
member of Prokino due to his prolific career as a film critic and work as a producer in the post-war period. He figures prominently in histories of Prokino, with good reason, but it is important to emphasize that his views did not necessarily represent the general tendencies of the group. Iwasaki courted controversy because of his skepticism as to whether it was possible for Prokino to reach a wide audience while eschewing commercial filmmaking practices, retreating from theatrical exhibition, and organizing small, ad hoc screenings. He also expressed reservations toward Prokino’s reliance on small-gauge film equipment and underscored the difficulties in totally rejecting mainstream entertainment film formulas. In addition, Iwasaki welcomed experimentation and lyricism, which he explored in his own film *Asufaruto no michi* (*Asphalt Road*, 1930), a city symphony. Still, Iwasaki was keenly aware of policy debates being conducted in other areas of the proletarian movement and sensitive to questions of political expediency and effectiveness. In “The Massification of Proletarian Film in Theory and Practice,” he references the lively theoretical debates surrounding the massification of literature. These debates revolved around whether proletarian writers should prioritize political utility, without regard to aesthetics and without hesitating to mobilize bourgeois forms, or whether writers should strive for the creation of a uniquely proletarian aesthetic (Shea 1964; Karlsson 2008). Similarly, Iwasaki writes, the question facing Prokino is whether the film movement should focus on accessible works for the education and recruitment of workers and farmers or rather works of artistic significance that emphasize formal innovation and intellectual sophistication.

Iwasaki’s statements drew harsh criticism from several other members of Prokino. In “The Development of the Proletarian Film Movement in Japan,” Matsuzaki Keiji attacked Iwasaki for using a “truly mysterious” approach that was “extremely unscientific” in everything from its methodology to its argumentation. He savaged Iwasaki’s predilection for aesthetic forms that the movement had already labeled as reactionary and decadent. Marshaling key NAPF spokesperson Kurahara Korehito’s theories to his side, Matsuzaki described Kurahara and Iwasaki’s approaches to massification as “totally opposed and irreconcilable.” He wrote scathingly,

... dangerous tendencies have begun to infiltrate our very organization, such as petit bourgeois proletarian film critics’ experiments, which obstruct the Bolshevization of the proletarian film movement or distort its form.

The further our movement continues along the path to Bolshevization, the more important it will be to fight these dangerous enemies who attempt to infiltrate our ranks by disguising themselves as allies.

(Matsuzaki 1930: 160)

Matsuzaki’s essay was reprinted in the Prokino anthology *Puroretaria eiga undō no tenbō* (*Prospects for the Proletarian Film Movement*) in July 1930, which collected what Prokino viewed to be key theoretical writings by its members. Many essays in the anthology addressed and defended the decision to prioritize mobile film screenings over theatrical screenings. Notably, the volume also includes several essays by Iwasaki. The inclusion of his articles suggests that the issue of mobile units and ad hoc activities was far from resolved.

Among the articles selected for anthologization, Namiki Shinsaku’s essay “Eisha katsudō ni tsuite” (“Regarding Screening Activities”) strikes a conciliatory tone. While not as famous as Iwasaki, Namiki was singled out in compilations such as *Prospects for the Proletarian Film Movement* as the main proponent of the Prokino’s mobile film units and ad hoc screening activities. Namiki is also known as a post-war historian of Prokino, and his book *Nihon Puroretaria Eiga Dōmei* (*Purokino*) *zenshi* (*A Complete History of the Proletarian Film League of Japan [Prokino]*, 1986) remains one of the most important accounts of the organization. Namiki’s close association with the
conceptualization of Prokino’s contingent filmmaking and film exhibition activities urges us to pay more attention to his theoretical contributions to the movement.

In “Regarding Screening Activities,” Namiki placed emphasis on the mobile film units as more directly connected with the proletariat and essential for political organization. Still, he noted, public screenings were useful as publicity for the movement: these screenings for general audiences drew attention to the differences between proletarian culture and bourgeois culture. Such events could easily be compared and contrasted with commercial screenings, as they took a very similar form (Namiki 1931: 150). Mobile film unit activities and public screenings could also take the place of, or complement, one another. Screenings in public halls were a necessary recourse when Prokino members could not gain entry to factories or otherwise access their target constituencies:

When we make a certain factory our goal [but cannot gain direct access], we must put on frequent film screenings in the neighborhood of the factory. Publicity must focus on that target factory, and devising every other means, we must try to mobilize the striking workers into participating in the screening.

(Namiki 1931: 150, emphasis in original)

To prepare for such contingencies, Namiki argued that it was necessary to have a more nuanced understanding of the difference between public screenings and mobile projection, as well as a better sense of the mutual relationship between the two (Namiki 1931: 152). He pointed out that, with the exception of the writer’s association, each arts organization within NAPF used a dual approach, drawing on both public venues as well as more direct means of contact with workers and farmers. For instance, rather than using the same Tokyo theater troupe for its public performances and trunk theater performances, PROT (Purotto), the Japanese Proletarian Theater League (Nihon Puroretaria Gekijō Dōmei, 1928–1931), deployed two theater troupes with distinct specializations in stage productions and mobile performances (Namiki 1931: 153).

Namiki wanted Prokino to minimize the differences between public and mobile activities by creating local organizations in factories and farming villages. He called these the “cinema leagues” (shinema rīgu). He hoped these politicized worker–farmer cinema leagues would mobilize the proletariat to attend public film screenings and, in doing so, create new opportunities for political organizing. Ideally, these groups would organize around specific worksites, but participants could also create leagues beyond the workplace. Community-based leagues would make it possible to carry out screenings and other activities outside worksites when assembly there was impossible (Namiki 1931: 157). Most importantly, the leagues would facilitate contact between workers and the movement both before and after screenings, ensuring that audience members were conscious of the political character of their film spectatorship (Namiki 1931: 156). Finally, because mobile film units were typically called on to assist with special campaigns, Namiki noted, their activities could be unpredictable. Namiki hoped that the organization of cinema leagues would give the units’ activities more regularity by introducing the oversight of workers and farmers (Namiki 1931: 159).

Despite Namiki’s conciliatory tone and his arguments for the deployment of both public screenings as well as more direct forms of political organizing, he concluded that mobile film activities would be far more useful than fixed film events, since the audience for public events was too heterogeneous. Public events attracted shopkeepers, white-collar workers, students, neighbors, and other random spectators, as well as workers and farmers: this was an audience “with the consistency of mixed stew.” Consequently, public events often felt “like a neighborhood affair” (gaitō...
teki), which was not conducive to producing the kind of single-minded collective consciousness that Prokino desired. If the audience could not be addressed as a single group, it would not react to the films as a single group, and so it was far less likely that workers and farmers would be correctly interpellated by the films. Namiki did not want to abandon public screenings, but he called for events whose “target audience is workers and farmers who have gathered with a purpose” (Namiki 1931: 160–161, emphasis in original). He underscored the importance of audiences “made up of workers and farmers in factories and farming villages, which are treated as units, and which are joined by their everyday economic interests” (Namiki 1931: 161).

### A day with the mobile film unit

A 1930 report on the Tokyo-area deployment of a mobile filmmaking unit gives us a better idea of how filmmaking could provide a vehicle for creating and maintaining relationships among filmmakers, workers, farmers, and activists. Namiki contributed this report, “Kyōdō kōsaku o toru” (“Filming the Co-Operative Farm”), to the September 1930 issue of *Proletarian Film* (Namiki 1930a). The excursion resulted in a documentary film titled *Kyōdō kōsaku* (*Co-Operative Farm*, 1930). Namiki’s article shows how filmmaking was integrated into Prokino’s political organizing activities, often in coordination with other left-wing groups. As the outing demonstrates, filming was not just a passive activity. It provided an opportunity for activists to go into communities, learn about their histories, and participate in their daily lives. Although Prokino’s films may not have been that impressive (as Prokino members conceded in essays and memoirs), filmmaking accomplished the goal of aligning artists, activists, workers, and farmers, creating a “mobilization network” (*dōinmō*) for more direct actions (Namiki 1931: 160). As Namiki argued in “Regarding Screening Activities,” Prokino’s mobilization network could generate further opportunities for film production and screening events, while film activities that were intimately connected with the everyday lives of ordinary people, and organized around the sites of their labor, could be used to politicize workers and precipitate their self-organization (Namiki 1931).

For the film *Co-Operative Farm*, Namiki’s arguments were put into practice. The article is presented as a report of a typical mobile film unit outing (Namiki 1930a). A branch of the Saitama prefecture agricultural federation had recently been established in the village of Shiodome in South Saitama County. On June 8, 1930, Prokino’s Tokyo branch was informed of the farmers’ first cooperative rice planting, which was to take place the next day. Despite short notice, Prokino member Morita Kōichi was able to locate a camera. He and Namiki traveled together to Shiodome to film. First, at Keisei Kanamachi Station, they met three students from the Tokyo Imperial University Settlement (Teidai Settlement). From there, the five walked along the Nakagawa riverbank for a half-hour to the Tokyo Prefectural Association Proletarian Legal Aid Center.

The Teidai Settlement was an important interwar organization for tenant farmers’ and workers’ aid and education. It was created as part of the “university extension movement” (*daigaku kakuchō undō*) in Japan. The university extension movement originated in Great Britain, where programs in adult education beyond the university were first explored at Cambridge and Oxford Universities in the 1870s. In Japan, the movement began at Tokyo Imperial University with the encouragement of faculty members, such as law professor Suehiro Izutarō. Its activities can be traced to students’ volunteer relief efforts after the September 1, 1923 Great Kantō Earthquake. Following the earthquake, the organization was formally proposed in October and became fully operational in the fall of 1924, when it moved into a brand new designated facility. Its organizational structure included departments for workers’ education, civic education,
research, children, and legal advice (Tōkyō Teikoku Daigaku Setsurumento nenpō 1926: 1). Members of the university’s Shinjinkai (New Man Society) helped create the workers’ curriculum. In 1925, Teidai Settlement courses for workers’ education and civics included general topics such as world geography and sociology, as well as more specialized courses about workers’ issues, such as labor legislation, labor union theory, and Japanese labor history. Special lectures examined topics such as “Universal Suffrage and the Worker” and “Dialectical Materialism.” Workers who enrolled as students formed study groups that examined issues such as “Reactionary Groups and Labor Unions” and “Will Farmers and Urban Workers Unite Behind Their Common Interests?” (Tōkyō Teikoku Daigaku Setsurumento nenpō 1926: 13 and 9). At first, the Settlement received support from the Imperial Household Ministry and the Tokyo City Social Bureau, but by the late 1930s, the Education Ministry and the Special Higher Police denounced the Settlement as a breeding ground for leftists (Choi 2014: 249).

Returning to Namiki’s account, at the Tokyo Prefectural Association Proletarian Legal Aid Center, Namiki, Morita, and students from the Teidai Settlement met the Tokyo prefectural agricultural federation worker “M,” who served as their guide for the day. M briefed them on the situation in Shiodome and provided background on the establishment of the Shiodome branch of the agricultural federation. Namiki and Morita filmed the legal center, and from there they traveled by car to Shiodome in a vehicle provided by neighboring farmers. Namiki comments in the article, “The car is the only means of transportation in the rural countryside. As members of the mobile film unit who travel to farming villages to project films already know, it is an absolute minimum requirement” (Namiki 1930a: 31). On the road, they passed several people who appeared to be tenant farmers. The farmers greeted M, giving Namiki the impression that “The entire neighborhood was pervaded by the strong influence of the agricultural federation” (Namiki 1930a: 31). The group reached Shiodome at noon, disembarked on a ridge between two rice fields, and Namiki and Morita immediately began filming.

Lens FL.9, aperture F4, focus infinity. We first shot the entire scene of the rice planting. Every field was brimming with the lively singing of energetic union members, but with not a single X [red] flag in sight, it felt a little lonely.

After we finished filming the entire scene, we shot the foreground and close-ups. An incredibly energetic old man; a young woman who, from the looks of it, was brimming, nearly bursting with fighting spirit; and an old woman wearing a bandana [tenugui] covered with all the slogans of the agricultural federation helped carry the seedlings. Every face was burnt deep brown by the sun, strong and reliable faces. Nimblly working hands. Determined faces. Before our eyes they planted the seedlings with astounding speed.

(Namiki 1930a: 32)

Morita donned tall rubber boots and waded into the field to shoot close-ups, while Namiki took notes as he listened to M’s history of the Shiodome farmers’ struggle.

According to M, the Shiodome tenant farmers had organized the union to combat a corrupt landlord, a man named Satō, who had committed numerous offenses. Satō was siphoning off funds meant for local elections and using the money to support a mistress. He removed the topsoil from fields and sold it off to a brick manufacturing company. Without topsoil, some of the fields caved in and filled with water. Even before the union formed, the farmers were frequently embroiled in disputes with the landlord as conditions steadily grew worse. After evicting farmers who were unable to pay their rent, Satō redrew the boundaries of the farmers’ plots, taking advantage of the fact that the dimensions were never clearly marked. The tenant farmers
fought back by erecting markers to re-establish the boundaries of their fields, and the formation of a union followed. After filming the rice planting, Namiki and Morita filmed Sato’s home, a large mansion encircled by fields from which the topsoil had been stripped and sold. The drowned, sunken fields gave the mansion the appearance of a fortress surrounded by a moat (Namiki 1930a: 32–33).

Namiki’s report provides valuable information about how the mobile film unit was conceived, as well as how it actually functioned. As this instance makes clear, mobile film units did not act alone. Prokino depended on other left-wing organizations as well as local informants to share important knowledge and resources. Although the full extent of this collaboration has yet to be examined by scholars, Namiki’s account provides some idea of who was part of Prokino’s “mobilization network,” as well as how these groups operated in the field. The article also provides helpful information on what was filmed, how, and by whom. Namiki includes details about shot scale and camera angle: for instance, we know that Namiki and Morita filmed close-ups of farmers’ sunburnt faces and diligent hands, long shots and bird’s-eye-view shots of the landlord’s imposing mansion, and close-ups of the mansion gate and its ostentatious nameplate. In addition, the expressive description of the planting quoted above suggests how these shots might have been edited together in the completed film. A scenario printed in the previous issue of *Proletarian Film* (August 1930) shows that Namiki imagined a far more ambitious film, which was ultimately abandoned. The scenario “Chronicle of the Shiodome Village Tenant Farmers’ Struggle” includes additional dramatized scenes, such as a scene of the landlord Sato losing an election and his mistress’s distress (Namiki 1930c).

Most importantly, Namiki’s report gives us a better idea of how filmmaking could provide a vehicle for establishing and strengthening relationships among filmmakers, workers, farmers, and activists. Mobile film units were helpful for the work of Bolshevization since they provided a pretext (filming) for such interactions to occur. Modeling the principles of Bolshevization, Namiki is careful to emphasize the two-sided nature of the exchange that is taking place. His article firmly locates political agency with the farmers while recognizing the important influence of the Tokyo Prefectural agricultural federation, the Prefectural Association Proletarian Legal Aid Center, the Teidai Settlement, and Prokino. Namiki characterizes the tenant farmers’ invitation as the impetus for the excursion, and repeatedly presents himself as a listener and observer, rather than a filmmaker and critic. The report amply demonstrates Namiki and Morita’s concern with questions of cinematic representation, narration, and style, but it also suggests the value of filmmaking as an open-ended and participatory activity that could be used for establishing communication, imparting knowledge, and encouraging cooperation among various groups.

And yet, in his post-war history of Prokino, *A Complete History of the Proletarian Film League of Japan* (Prokino), Namiki deemed *Co-Operative Farm* a failure. He describes *Co-Operative Farm* as an outlier among films made during Prokino’s “second period,” all of which (except for the film in question) began with a script and planning after thorough discussion at the Prokino branch level, and many of which were “documentary or semi-documentary” films (Namiki 1986: 270). Namiki does not go into details, but he states that “power relations at that time” prevented the filmmakers from supplementing the rice planting footage with the additional scenes found in the scenario (Namiki 1986: 102). In addition, the film received a tepid response from Prokino members. Screenwriter Hisaita Eijirō criticized the “seemingly happy” farmers for appearing too “carefree.” He felt it was a problem that the film did not include an antagonist or any scenes of organizational work, and that, accordingly, the filmmakers had not “filmed from the perspective of struggle” (quoted by Namiki 1986: 102). Farmers applauded *Co-Operative Farm* when it was shown at mobile projection unit screenings, but writer Tokunaga Sunao pointed out that farmers may have simply been pleased to
see a film in which they saw themselves (Namiki 1986: 103). The dissatisfaction with the finished film and distrust of the farmers’ reactions is not only a criticism of *Co-Operative Farm*; it also suggests some Prokino members’ reluctance to fully embrace Bolshevization. Much like the controversy surrounding Iwasaki Akira’s predilections for commercial and avant-garde film, the reactions to *Co-Operative Farm* remind us that the debates over political aesthetics, as well as political expediency versus artistic achievement, were extremely contentious—not only within Prokino, but in the broader movement. Still, to dismiss *Co-Operative Farm* without examining the policies and social relationships that made the production possible would be to disregard the important role that Bolshevization played in Prokino activities and strategies, such as the mobile film unit.

**Future directions**

Adopting a framework that emphasizes Prokino’s grassroots political activities fundamentally changes how we understand the organization. Prokino is sometimes described as a group of left-wing filmmakers and critics who attempted to revolutionize the Japanese film industry by promoting oppositional film practices—including alternatives to commercial production, distribution, and exhibition—and who endorsed a radically different aesthetic from that of the mainstream commercial film. However, to view Prokino only from the perspective of film history and film theory, and not within the context of the broader movement’s political goals, would be to risk overlooking what was most radical about Prokino’s work. Although Prokino criticized bourgeois film institutions such as commercial film studios and movie theaters, the group had close relationships with filmmakers and critics in the commercial film world. It received financial support from many professional film actors and directors. Even though Prokino was deeply critical of, if not downright hostile toward, film capitalism, Prokino’s main struggle was not against the commercial film industry. Compared to Prokino’s resistance to the Japanese state and imperialist capitalism, Prokino’s quibbles with the mainstream film industry were a trivial concern.

Because most, if not all, of the scholarship on Prokino has been written from a film-historical perspective, the group’s activities have been framed in ways that have left important aspects unexplored. Discussion of Prokino’s activities is rarely included in the extensive, and growing, body of literature on the interwar proletarian movement. Most of this research focuses on proletarian literature and fine arts. Much work on Prokino focuses on the organization’s film theory and important film theoretical debates among its members. Prokino’s wide-ranging publications included film criticism, histories of cinema, instructional guides, scenarios, reportage, political manifestos, and studies of film technology. Prokino documented its own history from very early on, publishing anthologies of major essays that were reprinted from serial publications that reported monthly on the group’s activities. There is such a rich archive of written materials compared to other extant documentation of the group’s activities that it is tempting to emphasize Prokino’s *writings*. In addition, given the important reforms and innovations being introduced into Japanese cinema in this period, it would be easy to mischaracterize Prokino as yet another reform movement that was focused on reorganizing and improving the Japanese film world. Certainly, Prokino’s critique of cinema as an industrial medium provides illuminating commentary on this crucial transitional period. These writers not only raised economic and political concerns, but also wrote lucidly about film aesthetics, emotion and identification, ideology, and narration. Still, in light of Prokino’s ambitious and indeed perilous political goals, a narrow focus on Prokino’s contributions to film history yields a limited understanding of the full substance and context of Prokino’s activities. Prokino’s history not only provides an important case for
comparison with other amateur filmmaking leagues, but also other political filmmaking groups and cultural organizations around the world—whose policies were similarly shaped by unique local challenges as well as international communism.

Notes

1 The history of these broad-based cultural movements overlaps with, but is typically treated separately from, the history of the Japanese Communist Party (JCP) and underground leftist political activities in Japan. For the sake of simplicity, I will generally refrain from discussing JCP and Comintern in this chapter. Interested readers should refer to Hoston (1986 and 1994) and Wilson (1998) for an excellent introduction to these groups’ activities during the period that I discuss. As Wilson notes, “the gap between the tiny scale of the formal JCP and the spread of Marxist ideas is one of the most striking features of pre-war Japanese Marxism” (1998: 296), and the relationship between cultural Marxism and Communist activity in pre-war Japan deserves more careful study.

2 See, for instance, Tepperman’s (2015) exploration of a wide diversity of amateur film practices in North America; special issues of Film History on small-gauge and amateur film (Stone and Streible 2003), nontheatrical film (Streible, Roepke, and Mebold 2007), and amateur cinema and its institutions (Salazkina and Fíbla-Gutiérrez 2018); and Acland’s and Wasson’s (2011) argument for “useful cinema.” As Salazkina and Fíbla-Gutiérrez observe, new attention to the social, political, and cultural relevance of the medium beyond commercial cinema with theatrical exhibition … allows us to focus on issues of civic engagement, education, everyday media practices, or political dissent and state control without abandoning questions of aesthetic experience or authorship; instead, we bring these questions into the broader spheres of cultural and social life.

(Salazkina and Fíbla-Gutiérrez 2018: vi–vii)

3 The Xs in this passage are known as fuseiji, a form of self-censorship that effaces any language that might draw the ire of state censors, which would prevent or disrupt publication. The meaning of the missing words can often be inferred from context.

4 Scholars of the proletarian literature and arts movement and its major policy debates usually translate taishūka as “massification.” However, for this essay, I have chosen to translate taishūka as “Bolshevization.” “Bolshevization” underscores the prioritization of grassroots political organizing and its basis in Comintern directives. This translation also avoids the ambiguity of the term “popularization,” another phenomenon one finds in late 1920s Japan, in the representation of the proletarian movement in mass culture.

Works cited


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Further reading


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