

Film Running Sideways: On “Gentô” Screenings

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In the late Edo era, the magic lantern — known in Japanese as the *gentô* — was introduced into Japan through Nagasaki and delighted audiences by throwing onto a cloth surface magnified images from multi-coloured panes of glass. After Kameya Toraku devised a wooden version which could be operated by hand, this *gentô* — or Japanese magic lantern — dominated visual culture before the introduction of cinematograph and became Japan’s own form of “projected image.” Fast-forward to the 1970s. In science classrooms at this time, images of bacteria greatly magnified through a microscope were projected onto a screen. In the dimmed room, to the rhythmic *kacha/kacha* sound of the machine, the teacher explained the characteristics of these microbes while presenting the sequence of images loaded into a projector. This was the slide image that was widely used until the advent of powerpoint.

Although these two devices may seem to be completely unrelated, in Japan both were known by the name “*gentô*.” But in between, there was another version of the “*gentô*,” now almost forgotten, that in its own small way illuminated the culture of post-war Japan. This was the roll filmstrip that used the same 35 millimetre film as cinema. Although made from the same film, the filmstrip used in Japan generally ran horizontally. Each frame therefore had eight holes, while the 35mm film only had four. One filmstrip work was small enough to be completely loaded into a photo cassette. Like a *kamishibai* (picture-show) man, the person working the filmstrip would then read the script out loud as they scrolled, one frame at a time, through the images. This device, however, was not only used for story-telling. It was a very

effective medium also for presenting both teaching materials in schools and information on social issues. This was because viewers could immediately connect with the words of either enlightenment or activism delivered by a live human voice. The portability of this device made its use popular also in social movements and the labour movement.

Filmstrip media enjoyed a relatively brief honeymoon in Japan until this “*gentô*” form merged with film and filmstrip shows were abandoned. However, for a time, the use of this form of media was astonishingly widespread. Although the profundity of the production technique is apparent when viewing, for example, *Daddy Went on a Bike*, research into the filmstrip has only really commenced in the past few years.

But now, the “*gentô*” is making a return to Yamagata. Unlike a previous occasion when the (contemporary) silent-film narrator Kataoka Ichiro was introduced to perform for Yamagata audiences, this year’s “Images of Family in the Magic Lantern” will be narrated by members of the collective research project on *gentô*. These *gentô* screenings will give insights into the image of the family and the ideology that supported this image during that time we know as the post-war era, an period characterised by a complex of poverty and a sense of hope. Yet, while *Nikoyon* gives an account of the bitter poverty of workers, *Torachan and Bride* and *Painless Childbirth* are permeated with an almost unbelievable sense of optimism, or we might even say even grace and dignity. From these works we get a sense of the power of the adaptability and free expression that was so fitting for the new post-war era.

(Translated by Barbara Hartley)

■ Screenings

Images of Family in the Magic Lantern 【YF】 10/13 10:00– [M2]

This program will feature a variety of postwar images of the family as represented in vintage magic lantern slides of the 1950s, encompassing themes ranging from marriage and childbirth to rural farming villages and industrial zones. Included in this year’s lineup is *The Role of the Wife* (1954), which revolves around a farming family in the Takiyama district of Yamagata.