

*Abstract*

WHOSE FILM IS THIS?  
COLONIAL AND OCCUPATION PERIOD DOCUMENTARY FOOTAGE OF  
KOREA

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In an essay first published in the early 1990s, Australian ethnographic filmmaker David MacDougall posed the question “whose story is this?” Documentary films, in one sense, are the “property” and creation of the film-maker. Yet film always overflows the aims and expectations of the film-maker. The images can never wholly be controlled, and are therefore always open to alternative readings.

In this paper, I shall apply MacDougall’s question to some fragments of archival documentary footage of Korea in the 1930s-1950s. Many of these fragments of “orphan” documentary film are anonymous. We do not know who captured these images, or why. In this sense, the question simply means: who is the maker of this film? At another level the issue is “who is the legal owner of this film?” Yet MacDougall’s question also points to a deeper issue of belonging, for as he notes, “films are objects, and like many objects they may have multiple identities.”

Where documentary footage is taken by colonizers, occupiers, or foreign travellers, whose past does it represent? By exploring this question in the Korean context, I hope to consider some ways in which we may unpack, and perhaps expand the bounds, of the multiple identities and the multiple ownerships and identities of archival documentary film.