

Silent film tells martyrs' tale

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TOKYO -- A Japanese movie titled "The 26 Martyrs of Japan: *Ware Yo ni Kateri*," first shown Oct. 1, 1931, is being screened again throughout Japan to mark its 80th anniversary.

Nikkatsu Corporation produced the silent movie, which featured famous actors of the day, at a studio in Kyoto. Nikkatsu was a normal movie company that had no prior relationship with the church or any other religious organization.

The movie opens in the days when the Spaniard Pedro Bautista, a Franciscan missionary, landed in Japan as an envoy of the governor-general of the Philippines. A study has shown that the original film included a scene about the canonization of the 26, held in Rome in 1862. However, the English version includes no scene about the ceremony.

The 26 saints included six European Franciscan missionaries, three Japanese Jesuits and 17 Japanese laymen, including three young boys, one of whom was 12 years old.

Funding for the film came in large part from a personal investment by Masaju Hirayama, a Catholic. Starting in 1932, Hirayama brought the film to Europe and America, pulling out all the stops to arrange showings internationally. "Talkie" versions in English, French and Dutch were developed for the occasion.

Masaju Hirayama was the grandfather of Takaaki Hirayama, who became bishop of Oita and is now, at the age of 87, retired.

Masaju's reason for creating the film was to dispel the Japanese prejudice toward Christianity that had existed since the 17th century. It is said that another reason was to spread a positive image about Japan abroad; In September 1931, Japan had staged the Manchurian Incident (where the Japanese created a pretext to invade and occupy Manchuria) and was the target of international criticism.

This year, 83-year-old Franciscan Br. Tomei Ozaki is making a tour with the film, acting as a narrator at screenings and lending out copies on DVD.

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