

Public Financial Support of International Film Co-Productions in Okinawa during the 2010s

— *Jimami Tofu* (2017) and Strategies for Film Tourism —

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(Received October 31, 2023; accepted December 1, 2023)

Jimami Tofu (Jason Chan and Christian Lee, 2017) is a Singaporean-Japanese co-production filmed mainly on Okinawa Island. For its production, the film received funding from Okinawa Prefecture's Film Tourism Promotion Program (founded in 2014), a subsidiary program organized jointly by the Okinawa Convention and Visitors Bureau and the prefectural government of Okinawa. This program is part of the prefecture's efforts to facilitate inbound tourism through film and other audiovisual contents, efforts which initially started with the Okinawa Content Fund in 2011 and which resulted in several Okinawa-based feature-length international co-productions having been produced with public subsidies during the 2010s. The features shared by many of those films include the focus on local cuisine, the glamorous presentation of the sea and/or landscape, and the narrative centering on heterosexual—and often transnational—romance. Displaying all such common features, *Jimami Tofu* can be seen as being tailored to incite tourism to Okinawa. This is also evinced by the fact that, even before the filming took place, the filmmakers had entered into a contract with Encore Inflight to distribute the completed film for in-flight entertainment screenings on ninety-three air routes, notably including those which connect Naha and major overseas cities in Asia. Through analysis of the film text, this article will demonstrate how the visual and narrative features of *Jimami Tofu* are aimed for encouraging film tourism, paying particular attention to incorporation of the eponymous local food and other Okinawan traditional cuisine, the natural and historic scenery filmed in long/drone shots and underwater photography, and the romantic narrative between the Singaporean male and the Japanese/Okinawan females. This article will then point out possible uniformity of films made for touristic promotion by comparing the film with other Okinawa-based international co-productions.

Keywords: Okinawa; international co-production; film tourism; food porn; landscape; transnational romance, Cool Japan.

Introduction

Jimami Tofu (Jason Chan and Christian Lee, 2017) is a Singaporean-Japanese co-production filmed mainly on Okinawa Island, the main island of Japan's southernmost, subtropical archipelago. For its production, the film received funding from Okinawa Prefecture's Film Tourism Promotion Program (*Firumu tsūrizumu suishin jigyō*, founded in 2014), a subsidiary program organized jointly by the Okinawa Convention and Visitors Bureau (hereafter, OCVB) and the prefectural government of Okinawa. This type of public financial support is one of the recent trends of films set in Okinawa, but the stereotypical, glamorous representation of the islands in those films harks back to half a century ago.

Okinawa had remained under US military rule for 27 years after World War II. When the sovereignty of the islands reverted to Japan in 1972, Okinawa became a major destination for Japanese tourists. In 1975, Japan hosted an International Ocean Exposition in Okinawa, which was a large-scale national event for the celebration of the reversion of the islands. At that time, the touristic campaigns by airline companies began to promote Okinawa as an exotic seaside resort, transforming the image of Okinawa from one associated with the tragic memories of the Battle of Okinawa to one which extolled exoticism with subtropical natural beauty. As Tada Osamu points out, the glossy travel brochures and posters of this period often emphasized Okinawa's exoticism, while stressing that these islands are firmly within the national boundary of Japan.¹ This exotic, yet familiar image of Okinawa was further reinforced in the context of the Japanese economic bubble in the late 1980s, when the mainland Japanese private enterprises vied for the construction of hotel resorts along the west coast of the main island and the government encouraged development of resorts with the Resort Act of 1987.² While becoming more and more accessible to the mainland Japanese since the reversion, Okinawa was increasingly promoted as a brand name with exoticized natural beauty and unique traditional culture distinct from that of mainland Japan.³

In films, Okinawa has been portrayed as an exotic tourist attraction in mainland Japanese cinema. Starting with the 25th "Tora-san" film, *Tora's Tropical Fever* (*Otoko wa tsuraiyo: Torajirō haibisukasu no hana*, Yamada Yōji, 1980), a number of Japanese films have been presenting Okinawa as "healing islands" or "a place where the travelers discover themselves."⁴ The typical plotline has the mainland Japanese protagonist visit Okinawa, or has the Okinawan protagonist return home in Okinawa, seeking comfort from their stressful life in the mainland. This trend continued into the 1990s and culminated in *Nabbie's Love* (*Nabī no koi*, Nakae Yūji, 1999), whose major hit in both Okinawa and Japan has been seen as spearheading something of an Okinawa boom in Japan. Closely associated with the Okinawa boom at that time, Nakae's film has been criticized for its stereotypically euphoric representation of the islands.⁵ Together with Nakae's subsequent film, *Hotel Hibiscus* (*Hoteru haibisukasu*, 2002), Mika Ko claims that "stereotypical images of Okinawa may be more evident in these two films by Nakae Yuji than any other recent films set in Okinawa."⁶

Released in 2017, *Jimami Tofu* exemplifies a new trend in the post-Okinawa boom filmmaking, namely the local government's strong involvement in the financial support of productions and its encouragement of overseas filmmakers to produce their films in Okinawa. As will be outlined below, the local government started to introduce a series of funding programs at the beginning of the 2010s. These programs can be seen as a somewhat belated attempt to capitalize on the Okinawa boom, during which the islands had been used as a visually pleasurable film location for mainland Japanese productions, leaving little room for Okinawa's local film industry to develop. The films produced under these programs were expected to encourage inbound tourism from both mainland Japan and overseas. With tourism having been a staple industry in Okinawa since the 1972 reversion, the prefectural government was seemingly unable to find an alternative approach to stimulate the local economy. Thus, in terms

¹ Tada Osamu, *Okinawa imēji wo tabisuru: Yanagita Kunio kara ijū būmu made* 沖縄イメージを旅する 柳田邦男から移住ブームまで [Travelling across Okinawan images: From Yanagita Kunio to the migration boom]. Tokyo: Chūō kōron shinsha, 2008, 148. Hereafter, the English translation of Japanese sources is mine, unless otherwise indicated.

² Asato Eiko, "Okinawan Identity and Resistance to Militarization and Maldevelopment," in *Islands of Discontent: Okinawan Responses to Japanese and American Power*, ed. Laura Hein and Mark Seldon (Lanham, Maryland: Newman and Littlefield, 2003), 235.

³ *Ibid.*, 148.

⁴ Sera Toshikazu, *Okinawa eiga shi no fukugen: Senzen hen* 沖縄映画史の復元: 戦前編 [The restoration of the history of Okinawan cinema: The prewar period] (Okayama: Akizu bunko, 2012), 25.

⁵ Aaron Gerow, "From the National Gaze to Multiple Gazes: Representations of Okinawa in Recent Japanese Cinema," in Hein and Seldon, 306.

⁶ Mika Ko, *Japanese Cinema and Otherness: Nationalism, Multiculturalism and the Problem of Japaneseness* (London: Routledge, 2010), 83.

of the filmic representation of Okinawa, the public-funded films of the 2010s have a lot in common with the mainland Japanese representations of the islands in the previous two decades, merely replicating the Okinawan stereotypes which had been prevalent during the Okinawa boom. Through analysis of the film text, this article will demonstrate how the visual and narrative features of *Jimami Tofu* are aimed for encouraging film tourism, paying particular attention to incorporation of the eponymous local food and other Okinawan traditional cuisine, the natural and historic scenery filmed in long/drone shots and underwater photography, and the romantic narrative between the Singaporean male and the Japanese/Okinawan females. This article will then point out possible uniformity of films made for touristic promotion by comparing the film with other Okinawa-based international co-productions released in the 2010s.

1. The End of the Okinawa boom, the Rise of Content Funds

By 2010, the Okinawa boom was considered over. The sales of functional foods produced in Okinawa, which once sold well thanks to the islands' association with health and longevity, dropped in mainland Japan.⁷ It was when the local government of Okinawa started financing film productions, with the aim to prolong the Okinawa boom. First, OCVB launched Okinawa Film Competition (*Okinawa eizō kompetishon*) in 2009, to produce short films set in Okinawa. *Goat-Walking (Yagi no sampo, 2009)*, directed by the then-junior high school student, Nakamura Ryūgo, was one of the first films they produced. Initially, the competition was open to all; even the author of this article pitched a synopsis and was invited for an interview, even though his project was not selected for production. But soon, the government shifted focus to international productions and started inviting professional filmmakers to make short films. The case in point is *Rumah (2015)*, directed by Indonesian filmmaker Yosep Anggi Noen. There was an open call for film locations to the municipalities in Okinawa, and “to highlight the charms of Okinawa in the eyes of foreigners,” with the director having been chosen specifically from one of the ASEAN countries.⁸

Okinawa also began financing feature filmmaking, and the local government always had international productions in mind. Public funding started in 2010 under the name of Overseas Contents Support Program (*Kaigai kontentsu sapōto jigyō*), when the prefecture financed the Chinese-Japanese co-production *Celestial Winds (Tianshang de feng, Zhang Jiabei, 2011)*. The subsequent year, the government partnered with a private enterprise in Kyoto to establish Okinawa Content Fund (*Okinawa bunka-tō kontentsu fando*), which stressed the role of local production companies by requiring one of the producers be based in Okinawa and more than 50 percent of the main staff be recruited locally.⁹ They financed a variety of cultural contents ranging from a computer game to the stage performance of *karate*, but two of the three feature films supported by this program had overseas elements in them: One of the films, *Karakara*, is a Canadian-Japanese co-production, and although *How to Make a Penguin Pair (Pengin fūfū no tsukurikata, Hirabayashi Katsutoshi, 2012)* is produced only by Japanese production companies, it casts Taiwanese actor Wang Chuan-yi in the male lead and its Okinawa-based production company, Ritz Productions, is known for production and Japanese distribution of Taiwanese TV dramas. Then, around 2014, the government launched another program, Film Tourism Promotion Program, and began sponsoring more and

⁷ Tamanaha Yasushi, “Okinawa arata na kanōsei saguru: kontentsu katsuō de shimpo” 沖縄 新たな可能性探る コンテンツ活用でシンボ [Okinawa looks for new opportunities: A symposium on the use of cultural contents], *Okinawa Times*, July 30th, 2010, morning edition, 5.

⁸ “Furasshu: Wakamono no kodoku wo monogatari ni: ‘Rumah’ Noen kantoku” 〈フラッシュ〉 若者の孤独を物語に／「RUMAH」ノエン監督 [Flash: Turn the loneliness of youth into fiction / Noen, director of *Rumah*], *Ryukyu Shimpō*, March 24, 2015, 18.

⁹ “Okinawa hatsu no sakuhin shien / Kontentsu fando setsuritsu / Eiga gēmu seisaku ni tōshi” 沖縄発の作品支援／コンテンツファンド設立／映画・ゲーム制作に投資 [The inaugural support on contents / The launch of the content fund / Financing the productions of a feature film and a videogame], *Okinawa Times*, February 11, 2011, morning edition, 1.

more international co-productions. Some are shot entirely or mostly in Okinawa, as with *The Shell Collector* (Tsubota Yoshifumi, 2016) and *My Korean Teacher* (*Ikinari sensei ni natta boku ga kanojo ni koi wo shita*, Asahara Yūzō, 2016), while others may have only a few scenes filmed in Okinawa, mainly with the crew from their respective countries, as with *Zinnia Flower* (*Bairi gaobie*, Tom Lin Shu-yu, 2015) and *One Night Stud* (*You zhong ni ai wo*, Li Xinman, 2015).

Meanwhile, OCVB was also active in drawing the attention of local filmmakers and the public to international co-productions. A two-day workshop on international co-production in March 2012, organized jointly by OCVB, Japan Film Commission and UNIJAPAN as the industry program of the 4th Okinawa International Movie Festival, matched up local film directors and producers with invited overseas film professionals in developing a mock feature film project and pitching a proposal.¹⁰ OCVB also held symposia and screenings aimed at the local public, communicating the importance of film tourism in Okinawa. Examples include *Mirai Eizō Okinawa* (Future images of Okinawa) in October 2009, which involved the premier screening of OCVB-produced short films and a symposium with the panelists from Okinawa Film Office and Japan Film Commission.¹¹ Another example is the inaugural symposium of the Network for Promotion of the Video Production Industry in Okinawa in March 2010, in which the speakers explained the prefectural policies on Okinawa Content Fund and other funding programs to the public.¹²

The prefecture's continuous efforts to facilitate inbound tourism through film and other visual contents can be situated in the context of the Japanese central government's Cool Japan brand strategy, which originated in 2002.¹³ Japan tried to promote its pop culture products such as manga and anime in the international market, launching Cool Japan Fund in November 2013.¹⁴ In accordance with this national policy, Nakaima Hirokazu, the LDP Governor of Okinawa from 2006 until 2014, established the Department of Culture, Tourism and Sports in April 2011, which has been seen as a move to integrate local culture with tourism.¹⁵ Owned partially by the prefectural government, Okinawa Content Fund was also part of this project of commoditization of local culture. However, the efficacy of such public investment has been questioned sometimes. For example, the *Okinawa Times* article of December 2012 reports that nine out of twenty enterprises which had been funded by the prefectural government went bankrupt.¹⁶ Some of the co-productions financed by Okinawa never had a theatrical release in Japan, South Korean films *Star: Radiant Love* (*Seuta: Bichnaneun salang*, Han Sang-hee, 2012) and *Private Island* (*Ilta yeohaeng peuraibit aillaendeu*, Han Sang-hee, 2013) being two cases in point. *Jimami Tofu* was screened at the 10th Okinawa International Movie Festival in April 2018 and was theatrically distributed in Okinawa; however, it has yet to find a distributor in mainland Japan.

¹⁰ "International Coproduction Workshop in Okinawa: Handbook," Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, UNIJAPAN, Okinawa Convention and Visitors Bureau, Okinawa Industry Promotion Public Corporation and Japan Film Commission, March 24, 2012.

¹¹ "Mirai Eizō Okinawa" 未来映像 OKINAWA [Future images of Okinawa], The Kyūshū Block of Japan Travel and Tourism Association and Okinawa Convention and Visitors Bureau, October 3, 2009.

¹² "Okinawa eizō sangyō shinkō nettowāku setsuritsu kinen shimpojiumu: Chiiki eizō kakumei wo Okinawa kara" 沖縄映像産業振興ネットワーク設立記念シンポジウム～地域映像革命を沖縄から～[The inaugural symposium of the Network for Promotion of the Video Production Industry in Okinawa: A revolution of local filmmaking starts in Okinawa], The Okinawa Block of Japan Film Commission and Okinawa Film Office in Okinawa Convention and Visitors Bureau, March 19, 2010.

¹³ Douglas McGray, "Japan's Gross National Cool," *Foreign Policy*, no. 130 (2002): 44-54.

¹⁴ Cool Japan Fund, Inc., "What Is Cool Japan Fund?" Accessed November 21, 2023, <https://www.cj-fund.co.jp/en/about/cjfund.html>.

¹⁵ "Ken bunka kankō supōtsu-bu shinsetsu: Hirata Daiichi buchō bu kiku / Kempaku wo kassei-ka no kyoten ni / Kankō no chikara de bunka wo shinkō" 県文化観光スポーツ部新設・平田大一部長に聞く／県博を活性化の拠点に／観光の力で文化を振興 [The opening of the prefecture's Department of Culture, Tourism and Sports: An interview with director Hirata Daiichi / Make the prefectural museum a hub for vitalization / Promote culture with the power of tourism], *Okinawa Times*, May 24, 2011, morning edition, 13.

¹⁶ "Insaïdo kurikku / Ken no benchā tōshi seika agarazu / Kigyō ikusei taisei ni kadai / Keiei shien no kyōka hitsuyō" インサイドクリック／県のベンチャー投資 成果上からず／企業育成 体制に課題／経営支援の強化必要 [Inside click / The prefecture's investment in ventures is not successful / A problem lies in the system of the development of corporates / Support for managements needs to be improved], *Okinawa Times*, December 26, 2012, morning edition, 7.

2. The Characteristics of Public-funded International Co-productions in Okinawa

The features shared by many of those international co-productions made in Okinawa during this period include the focus on local cuisine, the glamorous presentation of the sea and/or landscape, and the narrative centering on heterosexual—and often transnational—romance. *Jimami Tofu*, whose title refers to the Okinawan traditional dish of peanut tofu, displays all such common features. In fact, the film can be seen as being tailored to incite tourism to Okinawa, as exemplified by its trailer, which may be deemed a so-called “food porn.”¹⁷ In the glamorous visual representation of food, it is often thought that certain images appeal to the senses. However, this visceral appeal of food porn is distinct from what Laura U. Marks termed as the “haptic visuality” of intercultural cinema. For Marks, it is the expression of minority or diasporic groups, who resist the “representational conventions” of dominant narrative cinema in order to represent their embodied memory of displacement.¹⁸ Although Okinawans can be seen as a minority group within Japan, who have been subjugated by both mainland Japan and the US, the protagonist’s opening voiceover narration in the film’s trailer casually elides that history, by the phrase “for 400 years it was a dynasty, now long forgotten.”¹⁹ The passive voice form of “forgotten” obscures the violent nature of annexation and military rule. With the memory of Okinawans’ displacement from their own independent kingdom removed, the images of arcane, historic relics become just one of the attractions that tourists, or viewers, can safely enjoy.

Moreover, the visual representation of food in this film is largely codified. In their analysis of “food porn,” Nathan Taylor and Meagan Keating identify four prevalent stylistic frameworks: innovation (presenting the food in unconventional angle and shape), entertainment (indulging the viewers with details), mastery (showing the food in balanced, controlled composition), and authenticity (making the food look real).²⁰ We can see the innovation framework of food porn in the sequence of the protagonist’s cooking. The sequence starts with an extreme close-up of a bitter melon being chopped, followed by a slightly wider shot of the protagonist’s hands cutting the bitter melon (Fig. 1-2). There is nothing innovative, or aesthetically unconventional, about this first shot. It immediately becomes obvious that what is being presented in this shot is a bitter melon. But the juxtaposition of these two shots creates a pattern. Next, we see an extreme close-up of the kelp; it is so close that we cannot immediately recognize what is being shown (Fig. 3). But the filmmaker does not leave the viewers wondering too long. Immediately after this brief shot, we see a slightly wider shot of the hands handling the kelp (Fig. 4).



Fig. 1-2 The sequence of preparing traditional cuisine.

¹⁷ BananaMana Films, “Jimami Tofu Trailer 2 mins,” Vimeo, April 12, 2017, <https://vimeo.com/212882132>.

¹⁸ Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 1.

¹⁹ Jason Chan and Christian Lee, *Jimami Tofu*, screenplay ([Singapore]: BananaMana Films, 2016), 7.

²⁰ Nathan Taylor and Meagan Keating, “Contemporary Food Imagery: Food Porn and Other Visual Trends,” *Communication Research and Practice* 4, no. 3 (2018): 307-323.

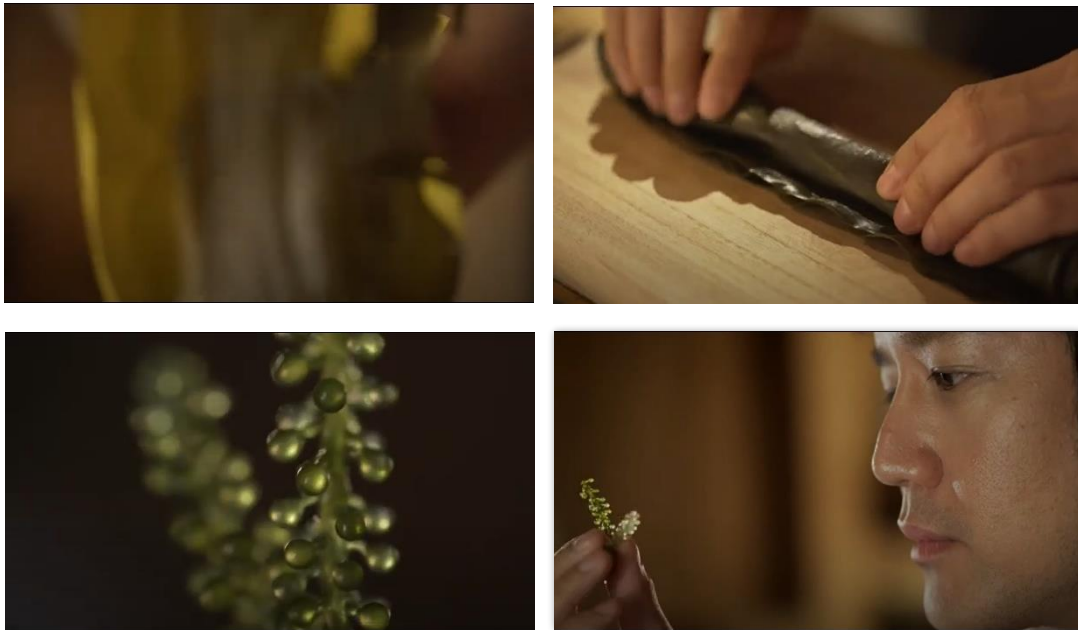


Fig. 3-6 The sequence of preparing traditional cuisine (continued).

The same pattern can be seen in the close-up shot of sea grapes, which is followed by the protagonist staring at the sea grape (Fig. 5-6). Here, the film engages in innovation, or the presentation of the unusual, unexpected shape of foodstuff, but it does so only insofar as such an image is followed by the exposition of what the image is about. The innovative image of food porn may pleasantly surprise the viewer, but it does not really challenge the viewer's perception. The other frameworks of food porn can be found at the same time. The sequence entertains the viewer with detailed close-ups; it foregrounds the mastery by showing meticulous attention being paid to the balance on a plate; and the process of a professional chef at work underwrites the authenticity of the dishes presented.

In contrast to the frequent close-ups of food, the nature and landscape are presented in long shots. While featuring the film's central characters, Ryan and Yuki, a Singaporean chef who starts living in Okinawa and his Okinawan ex-girlfriend working in Singapore, the film's trailer signals that the main visual spectacle that the film offers is the scenery of Okinawa. The POV shots of the characters make a clear contrast: In Yuki's point-of-view shot of the street, we see a fleeting image of Ryan, suggesting that she is not really looking at the city landscape; rather, she is looking for a character and the bustling street view is only a background (Fig. 7-8). However, in Ryan's point-of-view shot of the castle ruins from the Ryukyu Kingdom period, the camera or Ryan's eyes pan to capture the entire panorama of the scene. What the viewer is shown through his eyes is less about the story and the characters; rather, it allows the viewer to enjoy the view through the character's eyes.



Fig. 7-8 Yuki walking on Orchard Road in Singapore and her POV shot.



Fig. 9-10 Ryan admiring the view of the Nakijin Castle ruins in northern Okinawa and his POV shot.

In terms of the narrative, it is evident that the film is trying to resuscitate the “healing island” stereotype of the earlier Okinawa boom. In Tokyo, Ryan meets Yuki while working at a Japanese restaurant. He seeks to master the art of cooking, but his pride as a chef is shattered by her “sharp tongue”: she is a professional food critic and a scathing one. Therefore, he comes to Okinawa to be healed by another Okinawan woman. In the trailer, Ryan’s new girlfriend, Nami, describes Okinawan cuisine as life-medicine, using the Okinawan phrase, *nuchi gusui*.²¹ Since Okinawa is positioned in this film as a place for the protagonist to regain his masculine pride, the woman he meets in Okinawa speaks with a thick Okinawan accent. By contrast, his ex-girlfriend is played by a mainland Japanese actress and speaks in standard Japanese, although she is originally from Okinawa, too, and a childhood friend with the man’s new girlfriend. In fact, the film characterizes the ex-girlfriend as being alienated from her Okinawan background. In one scene, she speaks with her childhood friend in English, which is the second language for both. Even going against realism, the film erases any Okinawan trait from the characterization of Yuki, who is the cause of the protagonist’s distress, whereas his new girlfriend, who accepts him and gives him comfort is characterized as typically Okinawan through her accent. Such characterization suggests that Nami’s Okinawanness is part of the film’s healing island narrative.

Conclusion

This article has delineated the funding programs for filmmaking introduced by the prefectural government of Okinawa during the 2010s. The programs centered on international co-productions and the production of films that are expected to promote tourism, with the hope that the films would encourage inbound tourism to Okinawa. As a public-funded international co-production, *Jimami Tofu* provides a case study, whose visual and narrative

²¹ Chan and Lee, *Jimami Tofu*, screenplay, 29.

features, as has been revealed above by textual analysis, can be seen as encouraging film tourism, with such notable characteristics as the presentation of the eponymous local food and other Okinawan traditional cuisine in the manner of food porn, the natural and historic scenery filmed in long/drone shots and underwater photography, and the romantic narrative between the Singaporean male and the Japanese/Okinawan females. The film's affinity with tourism is also evinced by the fact that, even before the filming took place, the filmmakers had entered into a contract with Encore Inflight to distribute the completed film for in-flight entertainment screenings on 93 air routes, notably including those which connect Naha and major overseas cities in Asia.²²

This trend of public financial support for filmmaking continued until 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic forced all film productions and distribution to halt or delay by several months, or in some cases, years. With the lockdown in many countries and Japan's de facto closure of its national borders, inbound tourism became virtually impossible under the pandemic. Today, both film production and tourism in Okinawa seem to have revived once again, although international co-productions no longer seem prominent among recent films set in Okinawa. It still remains unclear whether filmmaking in Okinawa will revert to dependence on public funding, or a new production trend will emerge from the new global economic situation in the post-pandemic time.

Filmography

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Hotel Hibiscus / Hoteru haibisukasu ホテル・ハイビスカス. Directed by Nakae Yūji. Office Shirous, 2002.

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²² "Shingapōru hatsu Okinawa butai koi monogatari: Eiga *Jimami Tofu*" シンガポール発 沖縄舞台恋物語 映画「Jimami Tofu」 [A romance tale from Singapore set in Okinawa: The film *Jimami Tofu*], Okinawa Times, November 15, 2016, 2.

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Acknowledgments

This article is based on “Food Porn, Lovely Nature, Transnational Romance: *Jimami Tofu* (2017) and Strategies for Film Tourism,” a paper presented on August 29th, 2023, at the Association for Southeast Asian Cinemas Conference 2023: SEA the World! Southeast Asian Cinemas and Global Film Theory, which was held at the University of the Philippines, Los Baños. This work was supported by JSPS KAKENHI Grant Number JP23K00148. I also express my gratitude to Okinawa Film Office and Mr. Christian Lee, who provided me with an online screener copy of *Jimami Tofu*.