Alan G. Chalk Guides to Japanese Films

Lesson 12: Twenty-Four Eyes

Reading: *Twenty-Four Eyes*, 1952 novel, Sakae Tsuboi

Supplemental Reading:
Lessons focused on the teacher as a wartime dissident are found in the 1995 publication, *Imperial Japan: Expansion and War, Part III* (Social Science Education Consortium, Boulder Colorado 1995) by Jonathan N. Lipman, Kathleen Woods Masalski, and Alan Chalk.

Film: *Twenty-Four Eyes*, 1954, Kinoshita

Suggested grades: 9-12 and college

Themes:
The farewell to childhood, a post-war view of a teacher's and her twelve students' experience in prewar and wartime rural Japan; also, the traditional patterns of childhood and early education in Japan.

The story:
Music provides the emotional and thematic background of the film, *Twenty-Four Eyes*. Framing the opening and close is the song, "Aogeba Totoshi," the "farewell song" traditionally sung by students to their teachers at graduation. In the film the song is the graduation farewell of the young students to their dearly loved sixth-grade teacher, Miss Oishi, who had also been their first-grade teacher in their small, remote village elementary school. The song is also their farewell to childhood.

The setting of the novel and film is 1928 through 1946, on Shodoshima, a small island in Japan's Inland Sea. For most of the twelve children, who graduate from middle school in 1934, their childhood has been a period of rustic simplicity and poverty, and a time of innocent tears and joys. But the world they and their teacher vaguely sense before them is one rushing toward inevitable war. Their lives are being swept into a current of history over which they have no control. After the war, the survivors will look back on that period of childhood as a bittersweet memory of something they have forever lost. For the author of the 1952 novel, Sakae Tsuboi, and the director of the 1954 film version, Keisuke Kinoshita, the postwar view of prewar Japan is an attempt to come to terms with the Asia-Pacific War, Japan's devastating defeat, and suffering of the people. The issue of Japan's guilt in bringing about the war and causing widespread suffering throughout Asia as well as within Japan is not directly confronted. At most, Miss Oishi represents the few dissenting but ineffective anti-war voices in prewar Japan. She is a teacher, a wife and a mother who can only quietly protest, endure, and shed tears for the victims of the war. If her voice is heard, it is by postwar Japan in its renunciation of war and its embrace of pacifism. The message of *Twenty-Four Eyes*, then, is that of a return to the historic and traditional roots of Japanese belief in the innocence, sanctity, and promise of childhood.

Although the novel and film tell a story of Japan's tragic involvement in the Asia-Pacific War, it is told through the eyes of children and their sensitive, courageous teacher. This is the key to the success of both works in involving the audience; it is also the basis of the approach used in this unit to bring students into the intercultural experience. The story is about Japan and Japanese children, of a time past, but it is also about a timeless Japan's love and celebration of children and childhood. It is about today's Japan and, with some vicarious projection and imaginative translation, it is also about the reader's and viewer's own childhood and early schooling, at any place and at any time.

Teaching:
The children, when we first meet them, are first graders, brimming with shyness, tears, and playful laughter in their first experience of school. They are just beginning the journey which will culminate in the beautiful and sad moment of graduation farewell. We identify with them at the beginning of their school journey and early in their life journey. We can't know how these journeys will come out: whether the students will be successful or unsuccessful in school, whether they will follow and fulfill their dreams or meet with disappointment and disillusionment, whether they and those close to them - parents, family members, and friends - will become ill and possibly die. This sort of reflection is for adults and teachers. And so this part of our consciousness identifies with the young teacher, Miss Oishi, and her devotion to her first class. All we can do is to observe and care and wonder as she nurtures the children and the promise of their lives and dreams toward graduation and farewell.

As Miss Oishi takes her first roll call, we hear the students' names and nicknames, see their faces, and perhaps learn a little about them from remarks and reactions. But at first they are only twelve young children with faces and backgrounds that blend into a single image and generalization. We see them as simply "twenty-four eyes." Gradually, as the novel and film unfold, the children's faces and stories emerge with clearer individuality, and we are able to follow their separate but related stories.

For the students studying *Twenty-Four Eyes* one approach is to have each of them identify with one of the twelve children at the beginning of the unit and then create a biography for that child as his or her story unfolds. This should help the students transcend cultural stereotypes and facilitate the intercultural experience. Since all of the childrens' individual stories are not equally developed, some students will have to draw from the collective narrative what may have happened to their child. Of the twelve, one of the seven girls will die of tuberculosis, one will be sold off into servitude and apparently end up a prostitute, and one will vanish with her impoverished family.

At the end of *Twenty-Four Eyes* five of the seven girls will attend their reunion with Miss Oishi, who once again is a teacher in the remote village school teaching three of their children. Of the boys, three of the five will die in the war and one will return blind. We will observe only their growing up, their departure for the war, and the return of the few survivors; we will never learn how or where those others died. A provocative question is what nature of soldier they became and whether they too participated in the barbarism of some of the Japanese military. But this, too, we will not learn. The limitation of our point-of-view is that of their teacher, who saw only their childhood innocence and fragility as they were swept into history and their individual fates.

Although the novel is of reasonable length for assigned reading, the film is long, 156 minutes. If class time is limited, the following segments can be shown:

1. 1928, the new teacher and her 1st grade class, minutes 11-20, (from Chapter 1);

2. 1934, middle school, censorship and threats, min. 66-71 (from Chapter 6);

3. 1934, the farewell to childhood, graduation from middle school and the approaching war, min. 87-109, (from Chapters 6 and 7);

4. 1941, the war years, min. 109-123;

5. 1945, the survivors and reunion, min. 136-156 (from Chapter 10).

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