



A Documentary by Kazuhiro Soda
Observational Film Series #6

Oyster Factory

(牡蠣工場 Kaki Kouba)

2015, 145 minutes, DCP (16:9)
In Japanese with English subtitles
Directed, produced, shot, and edited by Kazuhiro Soda
Produced by Kiyoko Kashiwagi
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Festival del film Locarno
Official selection

SYNOPSIS

In the Japanese town of Ushimado, the shortage of labor is a serious problem due to its population's rapid decline. Traditionally, oyster shucking has been a job for local men and women, but for a few years now, some of the factories have had to use foreigners in order to keep functioning. Hirano oyster factory has never employed any outsiders but finally decides to bring in two workers from China. Will all the employees get along?

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“Oyster Factory” is a feature length documentary that observes and depicts the rich and complex world of small oyster factories including its fishermen and workers. The film closely follows their daily lives, which seem uneventful on the surface, but are facing some gradual, inevitable changes because of the depopulation of their town and globalization.

The small remote town of Ushimado, Okayama, by the Seto Inland Sea, is the backdrop of this documentary.

A white cat is lying down, relaxed, by the shore. His owner named him “Milk” but everybody calls him “Shiro (white)” because of the color of his fur. Curious of the strangers with a video camera, Shiro is always looking for an opportunity to break into the house where the filmmakers are staying.

There are six small family-owned oyster factories in Ushimado where oyster farming has been a long tradition. Now, in November, they are entering the busy season of oyster shucking.

Watanabe, who works for the Hirano Oyster Factory here, used to own an oyster factory in Minami Sanriku, Miyagi. However, since he was hit severely by the tsunami and the nuclear accident in 2011, he moved to Ushimado with his wife and small children to take over the business from Hirano who was thinking of closing the factory because he had no successor.

In Ushimado, the shortage of labor is a serious problem because its population is rapidly declining. Traditionally, oyster shucking has been a job of local men and women, but beginning a few years ago, some of the factories started using Chinese workers. The wave of globalization is already reaching this small remote town.

Hirano Oyster Factory had never employed any foreign workers before, but Watanabe finally decided to bring in two workers from China. He bought a prefabricated small house for their residence, investing a considerable amount of money.

But bringing on Chinese workers is not an easy task. First of all, they cannot communicate with each other because of the language barrier. Prejudice and fear towards “outsiders” are strong among locals. An incident in which a Chinese worker killed his co-workers at an oyster factory in Hiroshima is still a fresh memory.

One day, Watanabe hears unsettling news that one of the Chinese workers next door just quit and went home because he couldn’t stand the tough work. Being an outsider himself, Watanabe feels conflicted.

Watanabe’s mind is still occupied by his hometown in Miyagi. He learns from an oyster seeds merchant that very few oyster farmers have come back to business there. In Okayama, the use of the oyster seeds from Miyagi is banned because the industry fears that rumors of radioactive contamination could ruin their sales.

Two Chinese girls have started working at the Nakamaru Factory. Its owner, Nakagami, wants to retire and give his business to his son because of health issues, but he must wait until he reaches 65 to avoid an expensive gift tax. So he keeps working. According to Nakagami, there used to be 15 to 20 oyster factories in Ushimado, but many have closed because nobody succeeded them.

Meanwhile, the new Chinese workers Zhao and Zhen finally arrive. Can they all get along?

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

by Kazuhiro Soda

I made “Oyster Factory” in the same observational method and style as my previous films. I conducted no research, held no meetings with my subjects, nor did I write a synopsis before the shoot, in order to avoid preconceptions and pre-established harmony. In the editing too, I did not set a goal or theme before I edited the film. Instead, I tried to make new discoveries in the course of filming and editing.

In this film, I did not depict any violence, miseries, or social injustices that are often the favorite subjects of documentaries. You could find a trace of the disaster that shook the whole world, but the disaster itself doesn't happen in this film. What you see are the ordinary lives of loveable fishermen and workers.

Nevertheless, I believe “Oyster Factory” is a film about change.

When society and the times change in a fundamental way, I believe these changes happen gradually in our everyday lives rather than through a one sudden, big incident.

The speed of these changes is so slow that we often overlook them. But if you let your mind settle into a serenity, sometimes you can witness the moment where subtle but essential changes occur, making distinct sounds. I have a feeling that I was able to witness such a moment and depict it in this film.

The changes and challenges experienced by the characters in this film, such as the decline of the primary industry and issues of coexistence, are resonant with the whole of Japanese society and many other developed countries in the 21st century.

I believe what I witnessed at the oyster factories can be seen as a miniature of the larger world. I hope the film can serve as a window for viewers to think about the important issues we all are probably going to deal with at least for the next several decades.

PRODUCTION NOTES

by Kazuhiro Soda

As is always the case with my films, “Oyster Factory” is a product of happy coincidences.

Ushimado is the hometown of my mother-in-law (Hiroko Kashiwagi, one of the protagonists of “Peace”). My wife Kiyoko and I often spend our summer vacations there. One day, we met Mr. Hirano, a veteran fisherman and owner of an oyster factory.

I was always interested in the world of fisheries. People, especially Japanese people, eat a lot of seafood. There is a high demand. I had heard, however, that many fishermen struggle financially and that the number of fishermen is on the decline because not many young people want to work in this field. Why? I was curious.

So when we met Mr. Hirano, I felt it was a perfect chance to make a documentary.

Soon after I started filming at his oyster factory, I noticed a scribble on the wall. It said “November 9th, China is coming” which made me wonder what it meant. I also learned that Watanabe, who is succeeding Hirano’s factory, has moved to Ushimado because of the tsunami and nuclear disaster in 2011.

From this point on, the story of this film started to unfold by itself.

We filmed from November 4th until 21st in 2013, acquiring about 90 hours of footage. The film was shot by me, assisted by Kiyoko Kashiwagi. It took 9 months to edit. From this footage, we are also planning to make another film featuring a totally different character, the 86-year-old veteran fisherman “Waichan”.

The film will be released in cinemas nationwide in Japan in 2016. I’m also preparing a book about the process of making “Oyster Factory” to be published by Mishima-sha Publishing Company in Japan.



DIRECTOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Kazuhiro Soda is a Japanese filmmaker living in New York. He practices his observational method of documentary filmmaking in which he strictly prohibits himself from doing pre-shoot research or writing synopsis. He has such a policy to minimize preconceptions and to make unexpected discoveries while filming.

His debut feature documentary "Campaign"(2007) was invited to many prestigious festivals such as Berlinale and was aired in nearly 200 countries and territories around the world. It won the Peabody Award in the USA.

"Mental" (2008) won the Best Documentary Award at the Busan International Film Festival and the Dubai International Film Festival.

"Peace" (2010), the opening film of DMZ Documentary Festival, won the Best Documentary Award at the Hong Kong International Film Festival and the Audience Award at the Tokyo Filmex. "Theatre 1 and 2" (2012) won the young juries prize at the Festival des 3 Continents.

"Campaign 2" (2013) has been invited to such festivals as Cinema du Reel, Hong Kong International Film Festival, and MoMA Documentary Fortnight.

His latest work "Oyster Factory" (2015) premiered at the Locarno International Film Festival.

He is also the author of four books published in Japan including "The reasons why I make documentaries". He is the president of the production company Laboratory X, Inc in New York.

Soda holds a BFA in Filmmaking from the School of Visual Arts with honor, and a BA in Religious Studies from Tokyo University.

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FILMOGRAPHY

CAMPAIGN 2

Documentary, Observational Film #5, 149 minutes, 2013

- Official Selection: Cinema du Reel (International Competition), Dubai International Film Festival (Competition), MoMA Documentary Fortnight, Hong Kong International Film Festival

THEATRE 2

Documentary, Observational Film #4, 170 minutes, 2012

- Young Jury's Prize, Festival des 3 Continents
- Official Selection: Busan International Film Festival, Festival des 3 Continents, etc
- Japan Foundation Support Program for Film and Visual Media Production on Japan

THEATRE 1

Documentary, Observational Film #3, 172 minutes, 2012

- Young Jury's Prize, Festival des 3 Continents
- Official Selection: Busan International Film Festival, Festival des 3 Continents, etc
- Japan Foundation Support Program for Film and Visual Media Production on Japan

PEACE

Documentary, Observational Film Extra, 75 minutes/53 minutes, 2010

- Audience Award, Tokyo Filmex
- The Best Documentary Award, Hong Kong International Film Festival
- Buyens-Chagoll Prize, the Visions du Reel
- Opening Film, DMZ Korean International Documentary Festival

MENTAL

Documentary, Observational Film #2, 135 minutes, 2008

- Nominated for Asia Pacific Screen Award 2009
- Best Documentary, Pusan International Film Festival
- Best Documentary, Dubai International Film Festival
- Special Jury Mention, Miami International Film Festival
- Outstanding Documentary Award, Hong Kong International Film Festival
- Inter-religious Jury Prize, Visions du Reel
- Received a post-production grant from Asian Network of Documentary (AND) Fund.

CAMPAIGN

Documentary, Observational Film #1, 120 minutes, 2007

- Peabody Award, 2008
- Best Film, Belgrade International Film Festival

MY SON WAS KILLED

Documentary, 20 minutes, 2005, NHK

111 FIRST IN WINTER

Documentary, 20 minutes, 2005, NHK

NEW YORKERS

Documentary, 20 minutes, produced more than 30 episodes, 1997-2003, NHK

THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

Documentary, 110 minutes, 2004, NHK

SOLOMON GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM

Documentary, 25 minutes, 2004, NHK

FESTIVAL OF THE SUN (NHK)

Documentary, 120 minutes, 2002, NHK

INTERNET ADOPTION

Documentary, 59 minutes, 2001, NHK

THE FLICKER

Fiction, 17 minutes, 1997

- Venice International Film Festival, Italy
- Max Orphuls Preis Int. Film Festival, Germany
- Received Kodak Production Grant through School of Visual Arts

FREEZING SUNLIGHT

Fiction, 85 minutes, 1996

- Sao Paulo International Film Festival, Brazil, etc.

A NIGHT IN NEW YORK

10 minutes, 1995

- Flanders International Film Festival, Belgium, etc.

A FLOWER AND A WOMAN

5 minutes, 1995

- Special Commendation, Canadian Int. Film Festival

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REVIEWS

PardoLive (Locarno Film Festival's official daily) 8/5/2015

Kaki Kouba - Saturday, China is coming

by Aurélie Godet

If tomorrow Kazuhiro Sôda were to ring at your door with his camera in tow, rejoice. He would make your family and coworkers accept his friendly self, remain omnipresent but discrete, and would leave with a story much more thrilling than you ever imagined your daily life was, somehow also documenting your countrymen's idiosyncrasies and concerns in the background.

Who would have thought that fishing and shucking oysters could be so engaging to a film audience? It is, though. And for many reasons beyond the mollusk itself. Sôda's new observational documentary depicts the world of small oyster factories in Japan's southern province of Okayama, where rural exodus has made resorting to extra workforce from China unavoidable. As the staff of the Hirano Oyster Factory is getting ready to welcome two new colleagues, we gradually understand that the Chinese are landing on these shores with a bit of a reputation...

Viewers familiar with Sôda's previous documentaries (Mental, the Campaign and Theatre diptychs) will recognize the filmmaker's talent for recording people's unconscious behaviors and welcoming unpredictability. An open attitude rewarded again by a surge of strange or comical events.

Films may not change the world, but Kazuhiro Sôda's films can certainly show us how to look and truly see our changing world.

Hollywood Reporter 8/13/2015

New York-based Kazuhiro Soda's documentary reveals more of Japan's social problems through stories of struggling workers at provincial shellfish processing plants.

by Clarence Tsui

Online and in print, Kazuhiro Soda is never hesitant to make his political views known. The New York-based Japanese filmmaker writes damning posts about the rise of warmongers in his home country and abroad in his blog, and among his published books are Fascism Without Enthusiasm and Do Japanese People Want To Throw Away Democracy? His films,

however, have taken a very different approach, with problems in Japan's national narrative gently revealed through exposition-free representations of ordinary lives on the margins.

Oyster Factory, Soda's latest, which just debuted at Locarno, bears testament to the filmmaker's skills in wringing out big issues from the "little people." Edited out of 90 hours of footage shot over three weeks in one seaside community in southwestern Japan, the film slowly and successfully teases out the country's clammed-up anxiety about a new, globalized economy through the struggle of workers in mom-and-pop shellfish process businesses.

Engaging as always with his settings and subjects, Soda demonstrates an instinct in capturing fears and doubts when they come to the fore, while also carefully putting these emotional implosions in context. Always entrusting his protagonists to provide unintentional punchlines, he lingers for too long in certain scenes. Generally speaking, however, Oyster Factory offers pearls of wisdom about small-town ennui in the 21st century, and should again secure Soda yet another sustained run on the festival circuit after that of the Peabody-winning Campaign (and its follow-up last year), Mental, Peace and the two-part Theater.

Set in Ushimado, the hometown of the mother of Soda's producer (and wife) Kiyoko Kashiwagi, Oyster Factory revolves mostly around a cluster of seaside workshops in which mountains of the freshly fish-farmed shellfish is shucked, cleaned and loaded onto delivery trucks for the market. From the very start, Soda is able to convey the nature of a line of work which one laborer describes, half in jest, as tough and dirty. Muddy water splatters over his camera as he films the clattering unloading of oysters, and the shop floor in which all the processing takes place - a bare room in which workers sit on the floor for hours tackling all those sharp-edged shells with even sharper blades - is tidy but gloomy.

With not a conveyor belt or cellphone in sight, the labor nearly completely manual, and one of the workers slogging on while straddling her toddler, Oyster Factory could easily have been a film from decades past. Changes are afoot, however, as a note attached on the wall of Hirano's factory marks the date on which "China is coming". Not the country, mind you, but workers from there: because of the lack of new local intake - Hirano's urbanite son says on camera, with his father next to him, how he will "never" countenance taking over the business - the spiraling industry has resorted to bringing in workers from abroad.

As the two-hour-plus documentary slowly inches forward, the suppressed fears of the other begin to surface. While there are already Chinese workers in situ among the oyster factories, the new arrivals still vex the locals: some struggle to get up to speed about these developments - one spends a sizeable amount of money to get a prefab house for his two employees-to-be, while his wife learns Chinese - while others are more belligerent. A fisherman complain about one of his imported workers as "lazy" and "mental" - the latter a source of fear because of a recent violent murder involving a Chinese laborer - while another acquaintance is outright in saying how the "terrible" Chinese "just steal everything they see".

But the Chinese are not the only aliens in Oyster Factory. The wayfaring Watanabe, who plans to take over Hirano's factory, is a domestic migrant displaced from his northeastern hometown which the Fukushima nuclear plant meltdown has deemed uninhabitable. The pain of hearing these complaints about "foreigners" is doubled by his discussion with fellow fishermen about the decimation of oyster farms in his home region. In a scene following Hirano's son's blunt rejection of the family business, Watanabe mutters to an off-screen Soda: "People who come here are kind of losers, aren't they?"

Such sequential juxtaposition shapes Oyster Factory. Soda has long stated that he never does research, plans his shoot or meets his subjects before production begins; his empathy with his interviewees of course allows him to cruise along during the filming, but the "story" is effectively sewn up in the editing (in this case, nine months of work, says the filmmaker in his production notes). While it may seem haphazard or randomly assembled in the beginning, the film gradually comes together as the many different individuals, themes and morals coalesce into a bigger picture.

Combining a pervasive sense of grit and offering odd moments of grace - the town is part of what is dubbed "Japan's Aegean Sea" after all - Oyster Factory slowly cracks its settings of provincial serenity open and leaves the viewer to reflect on the future.