

Twenty-Four Eyes, Part I

Keisuke Kinoshita, Director (1954)

Cinematography: Hiroshi Kusuda

Production Design: Kimihiko Nakamura

Story: Sakae Tsuboi

Please note: This translation document is not a literary translation of the photo-story. It is a tool to assist intermediate-level Italian learners understand the text. In writing our photo-stories, we aim for a fluid, standard Italian, albeit at a high intermediate level. Then we write an English translation – which is naturally at an intermediate level of English – to match it. At times, the English translation retains a little of the Italian syntax, to give students a feel for the Italian language.

For this Japanese language film, we transcribed the dialogue from the subtitles, then had a Japanese/English translator check and correct them. As in all our Italian films, some of this film’s dialogue is in dialect. For that, we relied on the subtitles. Please see other comments about the translator’s work at the end of the first installment on the blog.

We have taken cultural differences into consideration in writing this translation from Japanese to Italian and then to English. There are two important examples of this here. First, there is only one word for ‘teacher’ in Japanese (*sensei*), but in Italian there are two: ‘*maestro/a*’ for lower grades and ‘*insegnante*’ for upper. Although we do use the term ‘*insegnante*’ in the photo-story, the children – who have known Miss Oishi since they were little – continue to call her ‘*maestra*.’ Second, there is only one title or honorific for women in Japanese. While we use both ‘*signorina*’ and ‘*signora*’ in the photo-story, we always call the protagonist “Miss Oishi” or “*signorina* Oishi.” Our choices in both of these examples seem to us in the spirit of the Japanese culture, language and the film.

The images are an important part of the photo-story. Each paragraph refers to specific images. Even if you don’t understand Italian, please read this translation alongside the Italian version on the blog with photos, so that you can have context for the words. Consider as well that these visuals help us to know the movie better: they not only enrich the story, but they also show camera movements, editing, the symbols chosen by the director and thematic ideas. You will also have access to the links to other references in the blog itself. (An underline in the translation document indicates a hyperlink in the photo-story on the blog.) Please see the blog, specifically on the page “How the blog works,” for more information about our translation philosophy and our glossary style.

Photo-story summary: In 1928, a young woman, Miss Oishi, begins her first teaching job. Each day, she commutes by bicycle – wearing western clothes – to teach twelve pupils on the Japanese island of Shodoshima. Very traditional, the islanders regard her as an outsider. We follow Miss Oishi, the children and the islanders through two decades, observing everyday life, with all its turmoil and joy.

The opening title sequence rolls over an image of water glistening in the sun. We hear a Japanese song that children traditionally sing at the end of school. Thus we learn that the school year has just ended and the new one is about to begin!

A boat floats on the still waters of Japan's inland sea, the Seto sea, under low cloud cover. In the background, a flute plays the wistful Scottish tune "Annie Laurie," also sung at school end of year ceremonies. Our story takes place on the Japanese island of Shodoshima.

We see men hard at work in a rock quarry, and pilgrims* with traditional conical sedge hats and walking sticks.

**Pilgrimages to Buddhist sites are popular in Japan. The pilgrimage route on Shodoshima reaches eighty-eight sites, including small wayside chapels and a series of temples built into mountain caves.*

As we watch buses go down a coastal road, a dissolve replaces them with walking figures. The roadside wall has disappeared. We have traveled back in time.

On the shore, a fisherman mends his net. Ox-drawn wagons move through the rolling hills. They are probably transporting soy sauce, a specialty of the island.

A caption in Japanese explains that the children in this village attend a local school for the first four years. For higher grades, they will have to walk three miles to school. This is, indeed, an isolated location.

Another caption provides the date: April 4, 1928.

We hear children singing. They walk along a country road in a small group.

*The hammer rings out without pause
Sparks fly and boiling water splashes
The wind from the bellows blows without end
The village blacksmith is hard at work*

The children wear traditional kimonos. Catching sight of someone, they cheer and run across a field, calling, "Teacher! Teacher!"

They gather around her and, in the island dialect, a student asks, "Are you leaving now?"
"I said farewell to the cape. Now I'll say farewell to you," the teacher (Toyoko Takahashi) replies.
"You're moving on to the main school now. Study hard!"

"What's the new teacher like?" one of the boys asks.

"She's very nice."

"But she's just a beginner?"

"Every teacher was a beginner once. Do you plan to make her cry like you did me?" she asks and they all laugh.

A man standing outside the group interjects, "You'd better not! My daughter will be in her class." He's the local porter and wears bells around his waist, a mark of his trade.

“What’s her name?”

“Miss Oishi”

“Big Stone? Then she’s very tall!”

“Names don’t always fit! Mine means ‘little grove,’ yet I’m quite tall. Miss Big Stone is shorter than me – only up to my shoulder.”

“Then she’s a pebble. Miss Pebble!”

“But she won’t cry like I did. I told her, ‘You might see children on their way to the main school. If they tease you, just pretend they’re monkeys. And if they’re mean, pretend they’re squawking birds.’”

The man chimes in again: “Monkeys and birds, get flying! You’re late for school!”

As the children run off to school, they hit the bells around the man’s waist. Laughing, they cry out, “Ding-a-ling man!”

The two grownups watch the children go. The teacher waves. “Good-bye! Be well!” She’s wearing a traditional kimono and *geta** on her feet.

**Geta are a kind of sandal with a wooden platform and a fabric thong. They are raised up from the ground to keep the kimono from dragging and getting wet.*

“Good-bye!” the children call out, as they hurry off like a herd of little colts. The boys wave their hats. The last boy turns and calls out, “Be a good wife!”

The children run along the sidewalk by a soy sauce factory. A tall mountain looms in the distance. Soon they’re in the village, passing houses.

We hear the tinkle of a bell, and a bicycle enters the frame. The rider, her hair tied back, is wearing western clothes: a blazer and a dark skirt, with white sneakers instead of the *geta* that the children wear.

“Good morning!” she says. It’s the new teacher, Miss Oishi (Hideko Takamine).

The children turn and watch her ride away.

“She looks tough!” one says.

“A woman riding a bicycle!”

“A modern girl!”

Riding along the coastline, she passes two people working in a field and calls out, “Good morning!”

The man exclaims, “A woman in western clothes!”

“It must be the new teacher,” surmises the woman.

“On a shiny new bike!”

At one house, a woman dumps out a pail of water, which lands right in the teacher’s path. But that doesn’t deter Miss Oishi from giving a cheerful greeting – “Good morning!” – as she rides by.

The woman throws down her pail and runs to tell her neighbor the news.

“A woman in western clothes just went by on a bike! It must be the new teacher.”

They run to the road to get a look.

“It looks like a man’s jacket!”

“What’s the world coming to?” wonders the neighbor. “Riding a bicycle and wearing a suit! A real tomboy!”

A dissolve brings us to the schoolyard, where the children from the opening of the film are gathered in a group next to the building. Cinematographer Hiroshi Kusuda has framed the children elegantly within an arc formed by a tree at the left, a stretch of coastline, the gridded school building, and a thick tree at the right that seems to grow directly out of rock.

We hear snippets of their chatter.

“Stop pushing!”

“Stop it!”

“It’s pretty!” Evidently, they’re gathered around Miss Oishi’s bicycle.

Abruptly, the teacher leans out the window. “Haven’t you ever seen a bicycle before?” Seemingly, the new-fangled vehicle is causing an uproar everywhere on the island.

The children back away.

“Who wants a ride?” asks Miss Oishi, and they run away in a big herd, leaving the bicycle all alone leaning against the building.

Inside, the senior teacher (Chishû Ryû) leans over a desk to peer out at the children. Once again, the shot is elegantly composed, thanks to the rectangles formed by the window and echoed by the charts at the right. The window’s large panel frames a rooftop outside, while the six smaller panes show still lives of foliage and branches.

After a brief look outside, he sits and opens a notebook.

Miss Oishi approaches and stands with her back to the camera. Then she turns to him and says, “My house is over by that smokestack. It’s fifty minutes by bike, though it looks so close.”

“Yes, it’s fine weather. Not too hot, not too cold. And it’s barely April.” He pauses, then says, “I’ll think I’ll go have a look.” He leaves the room.

The senior teacher walks past the noisy children and enters a little house.

In a dark room, his wife (Kumeko Urabe) sits on the floor knitting.

“Ah, what am I going to do?” he asks, settling on the floor.

“What’s wrong?”

“That new teacher has got a teaching license and degree and everything. Not like the country bumpkins we usually get around here.”

“Is she smart?”

“Seems to be.”

“You didn’t expect her to ride in on a bike.”

“Why send such a classy teacher here all of a sudden?”

Bells ring, and he looks up, taking off his glasses. “It’s the opening ceremony. My speech has to be good.”

“Keep your head high.”

“Okay.”

“Better wear shoes today!” she advises him.

“You’re right. I’d better look western today.” He picks up a bundle of straw and dusts himself off, while she fetches the shoes, which have been wrapped in newspaper.

Framed in the window, Miss Oishi gazes across the sea at her house. She has come a long way to teach the children of this island. The story of her life with them is about to begin. It will take us through the years before and during World War II, documenting events large and small, as we witness the unfolding of daily life here with all of its joys and sorrows, ups and downs.