

Twenty-Four Eyes, Part II

Keisuke Kinoshita, Director (1954)

At the sound of banging, Miss Oishi stands on tiptoe to see what's happening, then dashes out of the room.

The senior teacher stands by the schoolhouse wall. He has beaten on it with a wooden hammer to summon the children, who come running. Miss Oishi's bicycle looms in the foreground of the shot.

"Everybody, line up!" the senior teacher calls out, as Miss Oishi rushes to join them. "Do you hear me? Attention!"

The children have formed two groups. Miss Oishi goes to the younger children.

"You're all starting first grade, right?" she asks, with a big smile on her face. She rests her hands on the shoulders of the child at the edge of the group. "Let's line up. Come over here."

While she works with the little ones, we hear the senior teacher in the background still struggling to get his group in order. "Attention! Come, come!"

Miss Oishi looks up, wondering, "Are they all here?" Then she walks down the line, counting, "One, two, three, four..."

The senior teacher asks her, "Are there twelve?"

She turns back to him and reports, "Yes, all twelve present."

She lines up the children to walk into the school. Standing at the front of the line, she raises her hand and says, "Look at me!" Then she leads them to their classroom.

Miss Oishi stands at the front of her classroom near the blackboard, with her attendance book, while the pupils sit at attention in neat rows or in groups gathered around tables. Origami figures and flags hang from the ceiling.

"When I call your name, answer in a loud voice," she instructs them. "I want to learn all your names right away." She calls the roster, and each answers, "*Hai!*"*

**Hai means 'yes' in Japanese, but is also a polite term of acknowledgement – in this case, that the child is present.*

Miss Oishi writes the children's nicknames in her book. She won't use their formal names in class.

When the school day is over, Miss Oishi rides her bike home. In the background, we hear a popular children's song called "Hometown." She looks so tiny in this extreme long shot, a dot on the bright strip of road that curves among farmland and trees. A great expanse of sea and sky fills the back of the shot.

She enters the frame from the left. Outsider though she is, she seems at one with her surroundings – the nature that director Kinoshita highlights in his film. She pedals calmly along a country road bounded on one side by a rice paddy and on the other by the sea, which extends to low mountains at the horizon.

Clouds float overhead, she passes two pilgrims with their walking sticks near a roadside temple. White robes and sedge hats are typically worn by pilgrims, making them instantly recognizable as visitors on the island.

She comes upon a group of older students from her school and waves.
“Goodbye!” they call out. “Big stone, little pebble!” The uneven contour formed by the tops of their heads echoes the silhouette of the mountains behind them. Like Miss Oishi, the children harmonize with the natural surroundings.

In town, Miss Oishi calls out a greeting to another group of children.
“Big stone, little pebble!” they reply.
And she is off for home.

Three women are gossiping about Miss Oishi, drinking *ramune*, a typical bubbly summer drink. High overhead, fish hang on a line to dry.
“She wrote down all their nicknames.” says one woman.
“She said Mi-san was a cute name,” replies another woman, who’s wearing a white headscarf.
“Playing favorites already! They probably gave her a present!”
“She asked Fujiko if her family used to be village heads, like it was some big deal.”
The woman holding a wicker basket chimes in, “Village heads? They’re nearly broke!”

It’s another school day.
Standing on a raised platform, Miss Oishi asks, “Class, where does the emperor live?”
Little hands shoot up. She calls on Nikuta.
“The emperor lives in a closet.” The other children burst out laughing.

Miss Oishi laughs along with them, modestly covering her mouth with her hands. Other children raise their hands. They know better.
With a broad grin, she asks Nikuta, “Why do you say that?”

Very seriously, Nikuta asks, “Isn't he hiding in the school closet?”
“That's not the emperor. That's just his picture. This little school doesn't have a proper place for his picture, so we fixed up the closet to keep it in there. It doesn't mean the emperor himself is in there.”

A dissolve brings us outdoors, to a cherry orchard, in full blossom. In a line, the children hold onto a rope and skip. At the front, Miss Oishi is the engine of the train, moving her arms like the piston rods that keep the wheels in motion. The children sing:

*The train chugs along
Puffing white smoke
Choo choo choo
Choo choo choo
Through the tunnel
Across the railway bridge*

From above, we see the children climb toward us, curving around another bush in blossom. Rolling hills and a quilt of fields stretch out in the background. Miss Oishi is in the middle of the group, holding hands with the children as they sing:

*Mother Crow, why do you cry?
Because I left
My seven precious babies
Back on the mountain
They're precious, so precious*

One more dissolve brings us to the final song. The children dance in a circle, holding hands, beside a lake rimmed by mountains.

*It opened, it opened
What has opened?*

They put their hands over their heads, pretending to be lotus flowers, and spin around.

*The lotus flower has opened
And the minute it opened –*

The little lotus flowers sit down and bend over, hands folded across their chests. Then they clap hands.

*It closed again
Before I even knew
It closed, it closed
What closed?
The lotus flower has closed
And the minute it closed
It opened
Before I even knew it*

It's a rainy night at Miss Oishi's house, where one window is lit in the darkness. We can hear the rain beating on the roof.

Inside the house, Miss Oishi, in a kimono, is correcting school papers with her calligraphy brush. Her mother (Shizue Natsukawa) looks up from her sewing and says, "I hope the rain stops tomorrow. Your school is so far away."

Miss Oishi leans forward. "Today I asked the other teacher why people there aren't more friendly. He laughed and said my suit and bicycle are too flashy and make people uneasy... It's discouraging."

"Don't let it get you down," answers her mother. "People will always talk."

"Am I to walk there in a kimono? It's ten miles round-trip."

"A bike's not exactly a luxury." Smoke drifts up from the *hibachi** in the shadowed room.

"That's what I said! I told him I bought it on installments because I couldn't walk all that way."

"And you still haven't paid it off."

“The other teacher saves every penny he can. A woman buying on credit... he must think it's an outrage. So do the villagers, I'm sure.”

**The hibachi is a traditional Japanese device for warming the room. Secondly, it is used for heating food or water for tea. (It's normally used in the winter time. It must be chilly tonight!)*

Miss Oishi goes on, “I made my suit myself out of your old kimono. Yet they keep calling me a ‘modern girl.’”

“There's nothing you can do.” As consolation, her mother adds, “And older men who never made principal are sent there as their last assignment. They'll send you to the main school in a year.”

Miss Oishi pours some tea as her mother continues her pep talk. “It'll soon be vacation. Don't lose your spirit. Patience, patience.”

Miss Oishi corrects the children's calligraphy strokes. As she says each name, we see the child saying, “*Hai!*” as she taught them to do.

She tells her mother, “The day I began teaching was also the first day of school for those twelve kids. They looked so small and anxious. Those twenty-four eyes looking up at me were so adorable. I don't want those adorable eyes to ever lose their sparkle. You know, Mother, none of those children has time to play after school.”

“Most have to care for younger siblings or help with farming or fishing. It's a poor village. So I shouldn't let a little rain get me down.”

“Now you're talking!”

“I'll carry on, no matter what anyone says.”

“That's the spirit. Well, that's enough for today. The banker's wife always wants everything in a hurry.”

Miss Oishi gathers her papers and takes them into the other room. She is opening a *furoshiki*,* when something catches her attention.

**The furoshiki, or carry cloth, is used to transport just about anything (bento boxes for lunch, store purchases, papers, etc.). The cloth is laid flat, the items are placed in the center, and then the corners are joined and tied.*

Kneeling in her kimono, she peers outside.

“Mother, the rain stopped,” she calls out.

“Really? That's good.”

She slides the door open wider, leans out and announces, “And the stars are coming out...” The screen fades to black.