

Twenty-Four Eyes, Part XI

Keisuke Kinoshita, Director (1954)

We are still looking at a closeup of the photograph on Kotoe's wall: the boys as they were when Miss Oishi taught them years before. In the background, the children are singing a song from the old days. The image dissolves, and the song fades away, replaced by a military march. On a sunny day, islanders parade, waving their banners in time to the music.

*Our soldiers leave home
Bravely vowing
to return victorious*

And, one by one, the camera shows us Miss Oishi's students – some in their uniforms, others in kimonos – marching off to war, each wearing a sash that bears his name.

*In their dreams their fathers tell them
"Don't come back alive!"
With calm eyes they stare at enemy skies*

*With smiling faces they think
"May today's battle drench me in red."
They will never forget
their comrades
"Long live the emperor!"
would be the last words on their lips*

Solemn, the young men march on, as the crowd continues to sing.

*Ah, those faces
Those voices
My wife and child
Urging me on to great deeds*

Down at the port, the young men board a ship. As it pulls away, they wave to the crowd.

*Flags were waved so hard
That they tore in pieces
Now they flutter again in the distance*

Miss Oishi is at the dock to see her students off. With a small flag in one hand, she watches the young men going off to war. She's known them almost all their lives.

At home later, Miss Oishi is holding her baby as her two little boys march back and forth, in the hallway, sticks posed like guns over their shoulders. They sing a military song.

*Soldiers all in a row
marching with their guns
March, march, march*

Her mother hands a letter to Mr. Oishi. It's the notice that he's been called by the military and will go off to war. "I'll heat up some sake," she says.

As she puts the sake cups on the table, Miss Oishi asks, "Mother, you think it's something to celebrate?"

"There you go again!"

"He only got furlough because he's sick. They'll send him off again."

"Stop arguing!" Mr. Oishi scolds them. Looking up, he smiles and says, "Mother, I'd like some sake."

Fetching the sake, she responds, "It's war. There's nothing we can do."

"What's wrong with those kids?" demands Miss Oishi crossly. "Daikichi, be quiet in there! Are they too dense to see I'm upset?"

"They're just kids having fun," Mr. Oishi says soothingly. "Come to Daddy. I want you to grow up big and strong to take care of your mother and grandmother. I'm leaving for the war."

"Come on, let's sing a song!" he exclaims. He takes them back to the hallway, where they again march back and forth singing.

*Soldiers all in a row
Marching with their guns
March, march, march*

A dissolve takes us from the little boys playing at soldiers to a pier where another batch of recruits is waiting to set off for war.

A caption tells us:

Four more years have passed. As the war spreads in Asia, it only helps to increase the number of plain white grave markers.

We see apprentice Navy pilots standing in rigid lines.

The boys wave flags and raise their voices in a morale-boosting song. Children who once sang of mother crows and lotus flowers now celebrate the glory of dying for the emperor.

Miss Oishi is home with her children, now four years older. She is grinding wheat as her older son Daikichi pounds rice. The younger ones sit behind the table, cleaning lentils. A lamp above the table is the only illumination in the room.

Daikichi complains, "I wish I was in middle school. That way I could enlist."

"Are you that eager to die?" she asks. "After all I went through bringing you up, do you want me to cry the rest of my life?"

"You'd be the mother of a hero honored at Yasukuni."*

**Yasukuni is a shrine honoring the souls of those who died fighting for the Emperor. (After the end of World War II, this shrine became controversial both within and outside Japan, as it also honors war criminals.)*

She stops for a minute to add wheat to the mill. "What's so special about that?" she asks. "Being your mother is enough for me. You know, Daikichi, I just want you to be a normal human being, an ordinary person who values life."

Behind them, the little ones continue sorting through the lentils. They put the good ones into a bowl.

"No one else talks like that," he complains.

"They may not say it, but that's how they feel," she says, reaching for more wheat.

"My teacher doesn't talk like that."

"That's why I quit teaching."

"Coward! Coward!" her little son calls out.

"Fine by me. I don't need people's praise. I just love the three of you."

From the other room, a voice cries: "Hisako!"

"*Hai!*" answers Miss Oishi. She dusts off her hands on a cloth, gets up and runs to the other room.

"Mother, can't you sleep? Are you in pain? You'll feel better soon. I'll make some nice rice porridge tomorrow."

Daikichi looks over towards them, though he can't see either woman. The little ones continue sorting.

"What's wrong? Are the blankets too heavy? Mother, what's wrong?" The two younger children look up.

Miss Oishi calls out, "Daikichi, come here!" He jumps up and runs to her. "Go get the doctor!" his mother instructs him. "Tell him to hurry." He runs from the room.

"Mother, you'll be alright," Miss Oishi says. From outside the house, we see Daikichi running for the doctor.

Then his mother appears, yelling into the distance, "Daikichi! Tell him to come quickly!"

As she runs back into the house, a dissolve takes us to a vast field, parallel rows of crops receding to the horizon. A figure dressed in black enters the shot from the left, then a figure in white. With the occasional chime of a bell, a procession moves slowly along a path that cuts horizontally across the screen. It is a scene of somber beauty.

Then four figures carrying a coffin appear. This is the funeral procession for Miss Oishi's mother.

Under a torrent of rain, teenagers in uniform stand holding umbrellas. In the front of the shot, we see Daikichi.

An older man approaches, saying, "Oishi, your mother's here."

We see Miss Oishi, holding a closed umbrella. For the first time, she looks old. Daikichi goes to her.

"Mother, what is it?" She takes his arm and they walk together, framed by shadowed geometric shapes, toward a slender tree.

They stand out in the rain under an umbrella, in a composition of breathtaking perfection: the circle of the boy's umbrella behind them, the arc of hers framing them on top, the strong dark verticals, the mist, and a few stray leaves at the top of the frame.

"Daikichi, your father's dead. I just got the notice. I ran right over."

He looks down abruptly, and his mother takes his arm. "We must be strong, Daikichi," she tells him.

He doesn't respond. "You understand?"

She puts her arm around him and leads him away as a dissolve ends the scene.