

Sennan Asbestos Disaster

The long-awaited new documentary
from controversial and provocative filmmaker Kazuo Hara!
("The Emperor's Naked Army Marches On")

Over 10 years in the making,
this eye-opening and heartbreaking epic
chronicles the prolonged struggle of
a dwindling group of dying former asbestos workers
and others seeking justice and recognition
from an indifferent Japanese government.

Synopsis

In 2006, former workers and the relatives of workers at asbestos factories in Osaka's Sennan district file a lawsuit against the Japanese government seeking compensation for the damage done to their health.

Sennan, which flourished from the late Meiji Period (1868-1912) thanks to its asbestos industry, boasted over 200 factories in close proximity at its peak. Consequently, it came to be referred to as "Asbestos Village."

When asbestos is inhaled, it remains latent for many years until eventually causing lung cancer, mesothelial tumors, and other conditions. Although the government was aware of the health hazard after carrying out studies 70 years earlier, it prioritized economic development and neglected to implement regulations and countermeasures. As a result, many of the plaintiffs in the lawsuit suffer from respiratory ailments, and live in fear of the silent time bomb within them that could one day induce a fatal illness.

Director Hara documents the court battle and its participants over an eight-year period, following the activities of the legal team representing the plaintiffs, as well as the investigations of "Sennan Chiiki no Ishiwata Higai to Shimin no Kai" (Citizen Group for Sennan Asbestos Damage) founder Kazuyoshi Yuoka.

Yuoka previously managed an asbestos factory owned by his family, carrying on a tradition that began with his grandfather. The sense of responsibility he feels for the suffering of many of his former employees has driven him to become one of the central figures in the movement to seek recognition and compensation from the government.

Many of the plaintiffs came from outlying rural regions to work in Osaka, while others are of Korean ethnicity. All toiled away in atrocious working conditions at the factories, and were never

instructed to take precautionary measures when working with asbestos. They hope to win their court case, and enjoy a modicum of respite. However, the government continues to appeal each verdict in the favor of the plaintiffs, whose prolonged fight for justice takes a heavy physical toll on them...

Factory workers were not the only ones whose health was ravaged by asbestos production. The Japanese word “bakuro” (exposure) is used to describe developing an illness through inhalation of asbestos, and also applies to residents of areas near factories and members of workers’ families who were also exposed.

Plaintiff Yoko Okada is one such victim. From an early age, she lived in employee housing next to an asbestos factory where her parents worked, and often went there with her mother Harumi. At the time, they had not been made aware of the effect asbestos could have on their health. Yoko’s parents contracted asbestosis, and so did she. Now she has been forced to quit her job as a nurse, and cannot live without an oxygen inhalator. Despite Yoko voicing her resentment toward Harumi, they both decide to join the plaintiff group.

The first plaintiff group is comprised of 31 people. In 2009, prior to the conclusion of the trial, the group sets about gathering the signatures of 300,000 people demanding a fair judgment. In May of 2010, the Osaka District Court rules in favor of the plaintiffs. However, this verdict does not include compensation for family members and local residents exposed to asbestos. It is the beginning of the government’s attempts to delineate the official scale of the damage.

As Hara’s camera continues to capture the long legal struggle and the interactions between the various people involved, he comes to wonder whether the court case is merely a formality for the purpose of maintaining state power. Is there any point in playing by the government’s rules? He asks: “Surely this lawsuit isn’t a true expression of anger toward the state?” Lawyer Yukio Kamada replies: “It’s achieving substantial results, such as the hundreds of thousands of signatures we’ve collected, despite the lack of an organized movement or a labor union to rely on.” Meanwhile, Tetsuya Yamada of the plaintiff group admits: “It’s frustrating, but my grandfather was once arrested for denigrating the Emperor, so I don’t want to make things any worse than they are.” However, one man secretly feels the same way as Hara does: Yuoka.

In December of 2013, the second plaintiff group wins another victory in the High Court, and the legal team urges the state not to appeal the verdict. However, in January of 2014, as plaintiffs travel to Tokyo on a bullet train on the day a demonstration is scheduled to be held in front of the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, Yuoka declares that he intends to deliver a petition directly to Prime Minister Shinzo Abe at his official residence.

Director’s Profile: Kazuo Hara

Born in June 1945, Ube City, Yamaguchi Prefecture. Attended Tokyo College of Photography before dropping out to work as support staff at a special education school, where he developed an intense interest in the world of disabled children. Subsequently held a photo exhibition titled “Baka ni Sunna” (Don’t Make Fun of Me). Founded production company Shissoh Production with Sachiko Kobayashi in 1972. Made his directorial debut that same year with documentary film “Goodbye CP,” about changing relationships between the disabled and the able-bodied. Follow-up “Extreme Private Eros: Love Song 1974” profiles Hara’s ex-wife Miyuki Takeda, who had left him and moved to Okinawa, including an unassisted childbirth. Made in 1974, it drew acclaim as a pioneering “self documentary.” In 1987, “The Emperor’s Naked Army Marches On” followed former soldier Kenzo Okuzaki’s relentless hounding of his superior officers to hold them

accountable for their actions in World War II. It became a huge hit, winning a Best Newcomer Award from the Director's Guild of Japan, the Berlin International Film Festival's Caligari Film Award, the Cinéma du Réel's Grand Prix, and many other accolades. 1994 saw the release of "A Dedicated Life," an examination of truths and fictions surrounding novelist Mitsuharu Inoue, which topped film magazine Kinema Junpo's Best 10 list of Japanese films for that year. Presented his first fiction film "The Many Faces of Chika" in 2005, in which four actresses portray the life of one woman. Actively involved in cultivating new filmmakers, having taught at Japan Institute of the Moving Image, Waseda University, Osaka University of Arts, and other institutions, as well as holding his own film studies workshop Cinema Juku on an irregular basis. Despite being far from prolific, the films he has released to date are all highly regarded, and retrospectives of his works have been held at international film festivals in Buenos Aires, Montreal, Sheffield, Amsterdam, and elsewhere.

Director's filmography: Kazuo Hara

1972 Goodbye CP

1974 EXTREME PRIVATE EROS: LOVE SONG 1974

1987 The Emperor's Naked Army Marches On

- Best Newcomer Award from the Director's Guild of Japan
- The Berlin International Film Festival's Caligari Film Award
- The Cinéma du Réel's Grand Prix

1994 A Dedicated Life

- Topped film magazine Kinema Junpo's Best 10 list of Japanese films for that year.

2005 The Many Faces of Chika

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Director's Message

Why did I make "Sennan Asbestos Disaster"?

In making films, I've never contemplated the way in which I (we) go about making them. I believe I've made films to explore how I should live my own life, in response to the changing times.

During the period we call Showa (1926-1989), back when I was in my twenties, I hated my own cowardice and had a constant desire to become stronger. To fulfill that desire, I've made documentaries about people who practice radical lifestyles. Through turning my camera on them, I hoped to create inescapable connections, giving myself no way out, so that they would toughen me up. This gave birth to my "hero series" of four films.

Meanwhile, as I was preoccupied with my own desperate struggle, the era changed to Heisei (1989 to the present day). I searched for even more radical protagonists. However, they were nowhere to be found. As I wondered why, 10 years passed me by, and at long last, I finally came to a realization: the era we call Heisei no longer accepts radical lifestyles. This meant that the style of

filmmaking I adhered to for all those years had ground to a complete standstill. I wracked my brain to ascertain the themes that I should depict, but they were never going to be easy to find.

Then a certain individual asked me if I'd be interested in documenting a group of people from the Sennan district of Osaka, who were fighting a court battle to win compensation from the government for the damage done to their health by asbestos. In retrospect, I'm sure I was grasping at straws at that time. I began shooting without a clear grasp of what my key theme was. Therefore, I decided to keep shooting to figure out what theme I should concentrate on, in a mostly trial-and-error fashion. I ended up shooting for eight years, until the conclusion of the legal struggle. The editing process took another two years. I completed my film, and the theme I had sought for so long finally revealed itself, or so it seemed to me. In terms of the film's story, the ordinary people fighting the court battle are positioned as the protagonists, but as I also identify myself as an ordinary person, this film is also a rallying cry to none other than myself.

What kind of rallying cry? In this Heisei era, the peace constitution that has propped up postwar Japan is facing an unprecedented threat. Certain powerful figures are attempting to rewrite this country's constitution to serve their own selfish interests. Despite the fact that this will probably make life more difficult and create suffering for ordinary people in this country, they ultimately adjust themselves obediently in deference to figures of authority. Those who bare their fangs against the powerful are impossible to find. This film is a self-portrait of the ordinary people of Japan, who live in this spineless era we call Heisei.

(2017 / Japan / 215 min / Color / Digital)

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