



A New Moon Over Tohoku

Tohoku no Shingetsu

2016 • 98 minutes • Directed by Linda Ohama • Distributed by Yugen Productions

A New Moon Over Tohoku is a moving story of love, survival, and Japanese tradition in the aftermath of the 2011 earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear disaster in northeastern Japan.

Shot on location over two and a half years in the coastal villages of Miyagi, Iwate, and Fukushima, the film chronicles the healing journey of both the Canadian-Japanese filmmaker and the Japanese residents affected by the disaster.

In this film, Tohoku residents speak out for the first time, breaking away from their cultural silence to share their own stories. They speak of the profound, mystical understanding that strength has always come from their ancestors, and that they too now hold a unique place in the Japanese cultural continuum of survival.



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Face to Face Media 2020



CURATOR:

Justine Wiesinger

*Assistant Professor of Japanese
at Bates College*

—
*This guide was co-written by Justine
Wiesinger and Linda Ohama*

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WHY I SELECTED THIS FILM

The March 2011 disasters sit at the intersection of natural and man-made disaster, geographical histories of power (urban versus rural), and energy policy. This documentary offers a crucial lens on how individuals are affected by a cluster of interrelated disasters, presenting an appropriately complex picture of mourning, long-term impacts, and differing tactics in living life after natural and nuclear disaster.

As a researcher on the March 2011 disasters, I believe that it is extremely important to preserve the memories and testimonies of those who lived through the events. In a nuclear disaster particularly, human memory threatens to fade before the ecological and environmental effects of a meltdown do. This documentary is important because the filmmaker took time to invest herself sincerely in Tohoku before filmmaking began, and she prioritized the voices of its people.

Outside of Japan, centralized voices from Tokyo often end up speaking for the whole of Japan's experience, but in the case of the 2011 disasters, it is essential to create opportunities for the people of Tohoku to speak their own truth and describe their experiences. Some of Ohama's subjects share trauma expressed beyond words. Their stories benefit from the context of voice, expression, history, and the images of the survivors' environment.

Shingetsu is a Japanese word meaning "new moon": the moon that cannot be seen, yet it still exists with all its power in the darkness of the night sky. In this film, voices from Miyagi, Iwate, and Fukushima speak out, breaking free from shadows of their cultural silence as they tell their stories.

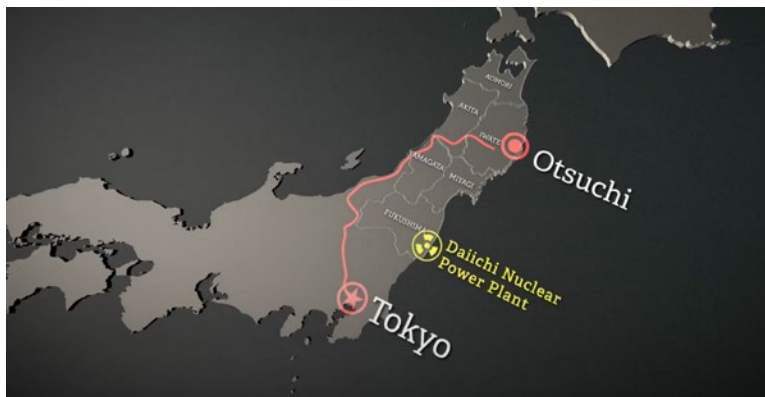
SUGGESTED SUBJECT AREAS

Anthropology	Geography
Asian/East Asian Studies	History
Environmental Science	Political Science
Ethnography	Sociology
Film Studies	

BACKGROUND

On March 11, 2011, the unimaginable happened when a powerful earthquake shook the Tohoku region of Japan and triggered a giant tsunami that extended 416 miles (670 kilometers) along the coast northeast of Tokyo. To make matters worse, the following day the first of three explosions at the Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant in Fukushima contaminated a huge area with radiation, forcing the government of Japan to declare a nuclear state of emergency.

The combined earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear accident shocked Japan and the world because of its severity as well as its complexity. While Japan experiences earthquakes regularly, this magnitude 9.1 earthquake off the coast of Sendai, Miyagi prefecture, was the largest ever recorded in Japan.



The tremendously powerful tsunami was the deadliest facet of the disaster, leaving over 18,000 people dead or missing and thousands injured. Between the tsunami and the nuclear meltdown it triggered, hundreds of thousands of people were displaced.

While there is disagreement about how long-term and permanent displacement should be reckoned, Japan's Reconstruction Agency estimated that as of January 2019, 54,000 evacuees remained in temporary refugee lodging. Many more “voluntary evacuees”—people who do not feel safe returning to their homes even if it is legal to do so, or people who simply do not wish to return—will never go back to their communities.

REVIEWS

The disasters sit at the intersection of natural and man-made disaster, geographical histories of power (urban versus rural), and energy policy.

“A New Moon Over Tohoku takes a raw, unfiltered look at the devastation and dead-slow recovery efforts to house hundreds of thousands of homeless survivors.” —**POV Magazine**

“This film documents the psychic and social costs still borne by the survivors—a must-see for all concerned about humanity’s unthinking embrace of powerful technology as well as the inspiration of the human spirit.” —**David Suzuki, environmental activist**

“Captures the heartache of loss in the subjects’ own words but delivers a life-affirming message of hope in the face of adversity.”
—**Justin Trudeau, prime minister of Canada**



Linda Ohama, director

THE ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE FOCUS OF THE FILM

Tohoku, the northeastern region of Honshu (Japan's largest island), has a fraught history in its relationship with urban centers of power in Japan, particularly Tokyo. Since the disasters, many have pointed to this history of an unequal relationship as underlying some of the disaster's causes, consequences, and exacerbating factors. While Tohoku has long supplied a large portion of Japan's rice and other agricultural products, labor from Tohoku has long been devalued. The result has been generations of its young people forced to seek work in Tokyo, leaving an aging and declining population further threatened by the disasters.

Because of Tohoku's relative poverty and its weakened civil society, subsidies and economic opportunities offered by the nuclear energy industry made the risk of hosting nuclear power plants more palatable to the region than it was to densely-populated and financially powerful urban centers. When Tohoku refugees encountered prejudice after the nuclear meltdown, many pointed out a grim irony: the power being generated at the Fukushima plants was not being used by Tohoku residents, but by those in Tokyo.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT: LISTENING TO THE VOICES

I arrived in the Tohoku region three months after the tsunami, first as a volunteer. The sheer scale of the disaster was far beyond anything I could have ever imagined. Walking through the broken remains of what were once vibrant fishing towns and close-knit farming villages, I could almost feel the people who had lived and died there. Sometimes it felt as though I could even hear their voices, laughter, or cries amid the eerie emptiness and smell of decay. One could sense the ghosts left behind in the ruins created by the tsunami, see them in the faces of the survivors, and hear them in their voices and songs.

Tohoku no Shingetsu was inspired by these ghosts, the real voices of the people of Tohoku, and the land and spaces around them. Each speaks to the breadth of our own humanity—of loss, death, and struggle, and of beauty, birth, hope, and renewal. They give us the sense that after the shingetsu, or new moon, a *mangetsu*, or full moon, gradually appears once again.

Following their interviews, many people expressed how important it was to finally speak about their pain, losses, joys, fears, anger, and love. And I could see on their faces that this process of storytelling was an important part of their personal healing.

“*The lives of the survivors represent the breadth of our human experience: the universal story of pain, loss, and defeat, and of beauty, love, rebirth, and survival.*

—Linda Ohama, director



KEY CHAPTERS AND SEQUENCES

Introduction 00:00–07:57

- Tohoku voices: what they lost and what they need most
- The meaning of shingetsu
- The role of traditions and culture

Chapter 1: Water and Fire, the Lost and Found 07:58–39:45

- Members of one family experience the disaster in different ways
- A town before and after being wiped away by the 2011 tsunami
- Dealing with death, loss, and challenges

Chapter 2: Earth and Air 39:46–1:07:08

- The effects of the Fukushima reactor meltdown, fire, and explosions
- A mother discovers that her children were exposed to radiation that will affect their health
- How the radiation spread far beyond the reactors
- Where survivors were sent to live
- The volunteers who came to help
- The Mayor of Minamisoma and the recovery his town
- Fukushima mothers and the worries they face

Chapter 3: Reconstruction 1:07:09–1:17:28

- Recovery and decontamination
- Monuments warning of the danger
- The first business to open inside the Fukushima "no-go zone"
- Returning home to a village that no longer exists

Conclusion & credits 1:17:29–1:33:06

- The important role of cultural traditions in the recovery process
- Cultural traditions and the recovery
- Generations of family roles
- Tohoku culture and the disaster



“It’s important to have people to talk to. And feel listened to. It provides a way for our people to release what they are thinking and worrying about. It’s proof of our living.

—Masao Uzusawa

WHERE TIME IS SHORT: SELECTED EXCERPTS

If time is short, teachers may choose to assign the following four clips or view them in class. These clips can be accessed and screened online via the Clips tab located on the screening page of *A New Moon Over Tohoku*.

Four excerpts with a total running time of 29 minutes

1. Introduction

00:00–04:25 (length 4:25)

- The 3/11 disaster and the meaning of shingetsu
- The spirit of the Tohoku and this film

2. Memories and loss caused by the disaster

33:11–39:46 (length 6:35)

- A community neighborhood watch is unable to save the people in her area and suffers from survivor's guilt
- Found objects like personal photographs, treasured by survivors, are carefully preserved by volunteers

3. Where to live and how to make a living after the disaster

46:59–53:41 (length 6:42)

- Where thousands of survivors of the tsunami and nuclear accident were sent to live
- A Fukushima man visits his business inside the no-go zone near the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Plant and wonders about his future

4. Facing the fallout of the nuclear accident in Fukushima

56:07–1:07:07 (length 11:00)

- A young man returns to his former home
- A mayor faces the challenges of contamination clean-up
- A volunteer helps test plants that remove cesium from the soil
- Fukushima mothers open up about their worries and living conditions

“*I realized that we can change the future with the actions that we take now. That’s why we must keep telling our experiences so this won’t happen again to others.*

—Fukushima Mother
(anonymous at her request)



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In the aftermath of disaster, what is the value in preserving survivors’ stories? What is the best method of doing so?
2. Where and how do these people find strength or comfort following a disaster?
3. Is 3/11 (the earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear accident of March 2011) a natural disaster or a man-made disaster? What groups of people might prefer either definition, and why?
4. If you watch the full film, what is the most impactful sequence in this documentary? What film techniques contribute to that impact?
5. Can a filmmaker from outside of Japan ethically address a Japanese disaster in a documentary?
 - What do you think of Ohama’s ethics and methods?
 - How does she position herself and her subjects?
 - What other choices might a filmmaker make, and what impact would they have?
6. Is this a national or a regional disaster? Is it possible to be traumatized by such disasters even if you were not directly victimized or bereaved by them? How might national responses be different from local ones?
7. How and when should people heal or move on from disasters such as these? What can help, and what could hurt, during these processes?
8. These disasters struck a primarily rural area with an aging population that is much less wealthy than residents of Tokyo to the south. How do geographic location, economic status, demography, and rural status affect the way the disasters are experienced?
9. How does local culture affect the way people experience the aftermath of a disaster? Give concrete examples mentioned in the film.
10. What is nuclear discrimination and why are Fukushima people worried about it? How can it be addressed?
11. How does the experience of the tsunami compare with that of the nuclear disaster? How do the aftermaths compare?
12. Is it possible for a region like Tohoku to truly recover from events like these? If so, what would recovery look like? What might be lost or sacrificed in certain visions of recovery?



THE VOICES OF TOHOKU

During the making of the film, director Linda Ohama travelled more than 300 miles (500 kilometers) along the coastline of Tohoku, interviewing 82 people several times each over two and half years. She accumulated 123 hours of transcribed interviews, 186 hours of transcribed and translated interviews, and thousands of still photographs.

To honor the people's voices, we are attaching an appendix containing an extended selection of interview excerpts from 25 people who participated in this film.

USING THE QUOTES IN CLASS

There are many ways to use these excerpts in class, including offering students the opportunity to select quotes and read them aloud. The quotes can also be used as springboards to discussions. For example:

1. Read the following quote, which is also found in the appendix. What is captured by statistics that measure the death toll or the harm caused by the disaster? What aspects might escape statistics? How do we know when an environmental disaster is “over”?

“*It’s now two years later and it’s still stressful. I don’t know what foods are safe to buy and what I can’t cook for my children.*”

—Kumada Kumi

“With everything gone in our town, the younger generation are moving away for jobs. The elderly people stay and have no jobs to go to. They are in the 2.73-by-2.73 meter (9x9') *kasetu* [small temporary housing] just getting older. Their lack of physical activity makes them weaker, and they are alone and worry a lot, which creates mental stress. So I worry about the increase in suicides that we are facing here.”

—Ikirigawa Yutaka, mayor of Otsuchi, Iwate prefecture



2. Read the following quotes. Following a nuclear disaster, what conflicting positions emerge? Why might survivors, even those in the same family, disagree about the disaster's impact or the best practices in the aftermath? What further tensions arise between groups such as survivors and corporations, or survivors and government? What effects might those tensions have on individuals, families, communities, regions, and the country as a whole? (Hint: consider financial pressures, gender roles, rural/urban dynamics and corporate/government interests.)

“...It’s now two years later [2013] and it’s still stressful. I don’t know what foods are safe to buy and what I can’t cook for my children. But [my husband] Koji says, ‘Let’s not think about how much more radiation they get, but let’s try to think how much we can reduce the radiation that our kids get.’ Does that make sense? All parents here with children have lots of these inner struggles. When I think about it, I go crazy. In this situation, you can’t just trust or rely on the government anymore.”

– Kumada Kumi, Marumori, Miyagi prefecture

“*The sheer scale of the disaster was far beyond anything I could have ever imagined. Walking through the broken remains of what was once a vibrant fishing town or a close-knit farming village, I could often feel the people that had lived and died there.*

—Linda Ohama, director

“A few weeks after the nuclear accident, the government and administration reopened schools before it was considered completely safe. Unfortunately, the children here were used in a PR campaign to express that things were safe. I was upset that the children’s safety was compromised and I lost my trust of those in charge. I realized that we can change the future with the actions that we take now. That’s why we must keep telling our experiences so this won’t happen again to others. People are forgetting about us. As Fukushima people, we have to make our voices heard until we die.”

– Fukushima Mother (anonymous at her request)



ACTIVITIES

1. Imagine an interview

Imagine you are going to make a documentary film like *A New Moon Over Tohoku*. Draft a list of questions you would ask a survivor or an otherwise related person like the people who appear in the film.

- What kinds of questions are most important? How should you organize your questions and topics for a successful interview? Are there questions that are inappropriate, insensitive, or unethical to ask?
- Share your questions with a classmate and exchange feedback. What kinds of interviews would these questions lead to? Would the interviews be successful? Would you learn what you wanted to learn?

2. Imagine a memorial

Individually or working in pairs, plan an appropriate memorial for the tsunami, the nuclear accident, or both.

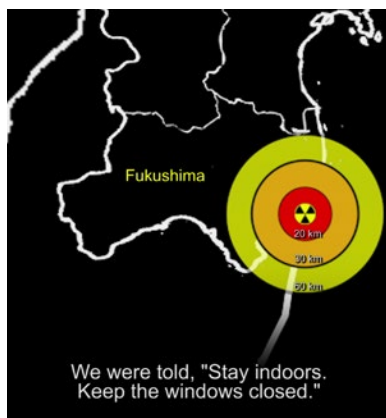
- What is the purpose of a memorial? What are its specific goals? Whom should it acknowledge, and how should it do so? How should it be designed? How should it meet the goals you identified? When should it be built? Does the construction of a memorial signal that the disaster is completely over? How do you think some of the people depicted in this documentary might react to your memorial?

3. Explore oral history and engage with the archive

One of the key features of this documentary is its commitment to recording and preserving the experiences of Tohoku's residents. Each person interviewed represents a unique experience of the Tohoku disaster. This teacher's guide includes an appendix with excerpts from their original interviews.

- Choose a resident and read his or her extended quote in the appendix. Try to imagine the person's experience. What would it be like to live through it and walk in this person's shoes? How would you feel? In your own words, write down or discuss with a partner how you might feel during both the 2011 catastrophe and the interview. Next, imagine what might have changed 10 years later. What might heal, and how? What might not, and why?

The disasters sit at the intersection of natural and man-made disaster, geographical histories of power (urban versus rural), and energy policy.



- Take turns reading the interview you chose—or part of it—aloud for the class.
- Afterward, reflect in small groups. How does your experience of the interview change when it is read aloud? What becomes available to us in this process that is different from simply reading the quotes, or a summary of such responses, in a history textbook?
- Optional reflective writing: on your own, write freely about your experience. What was valuable in this exercise? Did anything unexpected come up for you? What does your experience with this activity tell you about how we can or should engage with this kind of material (archives of oral testimony that are encountered either in text or on film)?

4. Research the nuclear facility that is closest to where you live or attend school

- How old is this facility? What natural disasters in your area could trigger an accident at that facility?
- Propose a plan to follow in the event of a meltdown at that facility. Who would have to be evacuated? For how long? Should evacuees receive compensation? Where should they be evacuated to?
- What help must be made available to sick residents, disabled people, children, and the elderly during the evacuation process and in evacuation facilities? What other groups are vulnerable in these circumstances, and what help should they receive? How will we know when the danger of exposure to radiation is over?

5. Big project: working in small groups, draft recovery plans for the Tohoku region, starting in 2011

- What challenges need to be met? What needs to be restored? What needs to be changed? What should be prioritized? What should or must be let go?
- Can/should local culture be preserved?
- Can people return to the area around the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant? Can/should nuclear power plants resume their work in Tohoku and in Japan overall?
- How can the population's problem of super-aging, with many young people fleeing the area, be fixed? What should the budget be, and who should pay? What will the timeline be?



Research costs, budgets, and timelines. You will find it helpful to read newspaper articles, recovery plans, and other sources about how local and central governments really did respond. You will learn what ideas were proposed, and how real-life plans and policies were received and critiqued. This will help you decide how you may want to proceed in your planning.

Present your plan to classmates. Classmates may be assigned different roles or positions to facilitate a rich town hall-style debate. Such roles and positions may include:

- central government officials who wish to keep costs down and avoid associating Japan's international reputation too much with disaster
- local government officials with limited budgets; they must act as a liaison between local people and the central government
- farmers and fishers who depend on young labor and the perception that their goods are safe to consume
- parents who are not only concerned about employment but also the impact of radiation on children
- local elders who wish to preserve their town's culture, history, and community
- nuclear power plant owners who wish to return to business quickly and will offer financial incentives to local and central government
- Tokyo residents who do not want to be threatened by radiation but also may not want to pay high taxes to restore rural areas
- refugees from the nuclear accident who need to be assured of safety before they are willing to return

Use the people you see in the documentary for inspiration.

Consider carefully what your role's needs are.

Discuss the town hall debates when they are finished. Were your plans successful or unsuccessful? What obstacles existed in creating a viable recovery plan? What was the hardest aspect to resolve?

SUPPLEMENTARY RESOURCES

Interviews with the film's director, Linda Ohama

[At the Vancouver International Film Festival](#)

[In the JCC Bulletin](#)

[For POV Magazine](#)

[About the cloth letter campaign](#)

An update on the refugees

[Nippon.com: The State of Recovery in Tohoku Eight Years after 3/11](#)

Teaching about disasters

The [Teach311 + COVID-19 Collective \(teach311.org\)](http://teach311.org) consists of educators, researchers, artists, students, and survivors spanning disciplinary and linguistic boundaries who study disasters and teach about them. The collective uses a collaborative process of research, learning, and teaching to empathically inquire into crises of the past.

Jeff Kingston, ed. *Natural Disaster and Nuclear Crisis in Japan: Response and Recovery after Japan's 3/11*. New York: Routledge, 2012.

APPENDIX: VOICES OF TOHOKU



1. NOBUAKI OHASHI

Sendai, Miyagi prefecture

Shakuhachi musician, writer, and performer; retired architect

“On the day of the earthquake, I was in the Edohana countryside near Sendai City with my wife, working in our vegetable garden plot. At that time, hundreds of white swans took flight and filled the air. We thought it was very strange. We thought we had better go home, and when we got there, the house started shaking violently, things falling from everywhere. It was the big earthquake.”



2. ETSUKO ONUMA AND HER DAUGHTER

Murata, Miyagi prefecture

Sixth- and seventh-generation family owner of a historical museum and Edo-period kura [storehouse]

“Since I was small, we had a *hina* [handmade ceremonial dolls] doll festival every year except during the war years...and not this year. The hina dolls survived the air raid bombings in World War II and also the powerful shaking during the Great Tohoku Earthquake because they were safe and asleep inside the kura. After the tsunami, this year’s hina doll *matsuri* was canceled because no one had any feelings left for it after such a disaster. The dolls will stay sleeping in the kura until next year, when we will have our doll festival again.”



3. KANAKO SASAKI

Otsuchi, Iwate prefecture

Acupuncture doctor, mental caregiver; her house and clinic were swept away by the tsunami

“Immediately after the tsunami, I needed to help injured people with just what we had around us: branches, ropes, and no medical supplies. What has changed the most since the disaster is the need to heal not only physical injuries but healing the emotional injuries and trauma, too.

“Medical scholars from a university in Japan came to help give us some support. We came together and they studied our medical records and data. These were submitted to the world to make a special course on basic healings using the hands. My mission is to have people study and know more about this way of treatment.”



4. **MISAKI (SASAKI) OHTA**

Otsuchi, Iwate prefecture

Young mother of two, including a two-week-old baby at the time of the tsunami; traditional dancer and daughter of Kanako Sasaki

“The disaster brought us many difficulties. Because of that experience, I got a lot of support from others and a feeling of gratitude, realizing what is most important in life. We thought of moving to a more convenient place in the interior for our children, but we have the family grave here to take care of and a responsibility to teach our traditional dance to our young people who are left. As I have loved dancing since I was young, it is a natural part of my body. So after the disaster, I restarted dancing and teaching our traditional *torikomai kagura* [sacred regional dance]. If we leave, there will be no future left for the torikomai kagura. So we will stay.”



5. **SERA SASAKI**

Born in Otsuchi, Iwate prefecture

University student in Tokyo; experienced the earthquake in Tokyo

“In my heart, I wanted to go home right away, but there was no way to get home. News was constantly reporting about the damages in Tohoku. Four or five days after the disaster, there was a story on TV about a woman found still alive in the wrecked debris of a house. It said it was my hometown of Otsuchi. When I was watching this news, suddenly I saw my grandpa being interviewed for finding her. I had not been able to contact my family yet, so I still didn’t know if anyone was alive or not. When I saw the TV news, I felt so happy and was crying to see at least my grandpa alive.”



6. **KAZUHISA SASAKI**

Otsuchi, Iwate prefecture

Long distance trucker; married to Kanako 26 years

“When the earthquake happened, I was driving my truck on the highway near Tokyo and couldn’t drive anymore because of all the shaking, so I parked on the side and called on my cell phone to Kanako. It happened to be lucky to connect and she was half crying, saying it’s the end for her.”



7/8. GOROU AND KOUKO OGUNI

Otsuchi, Iwate prefecture

Kanako Sasaki's parents

Gorou: "I used to go to this neighbor's house to take her onions from our garden and then stay for some tea. We couldn't see her for four or five days after the disaster. She was by herself on the second floor of her broken house. She had been sitting there all the days and nights and did not eat anything or move. Sometimes she was blowing a whistle. That day I was walking and could hear her whistle."

Kouko: "A whistle is very useful. During the disaster, some people used the whistle. Every day I have one on my neck."

Gorou: "But after a disaster, people begin to forget to take care and don't do that so much."



9. MASAO UZUSAWA

Otsuchi-Kamaishi, Iwate prefecture

*66-year-old professional photographer and retired steelworker;
Passed away a few years after the disaster*

"Because of the tsunami, many people came here to volunteer and help. We talked and new connections were made. Teachers came. Reporters came. Writers of books came. They ask our people about their feelings, thoughts, and worries. It was good. Otherwise, the people who suffered didn't have much voice. They couldn't tell anybody. It's important to have people to talk to. And feel listened to. It provides a way for our people to release what they are thinking and worrying about. It's proof of our living. We are thankful for that."



10. YUTAKA IKARIGAWA

Otsuchi, Iwate prefecture

Post-disaster mayor after Mayor Kato, who died in the tsunami

"With everything gone in our town, the younger generation are moving away for jobs. The elderly people stay and have no jobs to go to. They are in the 2.73-by-2.73-meter kasetsu, just getting older. Their lack of physical activity makes them weaker and they are alone and worry a lot, which creates mental stress. So I worry about the increase in suicides that we are facing here."



11/12. THE SATO FAMILY

Arahama, Miyagi prefecture

80-year-old shell fisherman and family

Mr. Sato: “We are fishermen. We catch *shirame*. But we can’t catch them right now. It’s affected by the nuclear plant accident. I understand we have to accept nature. But a disaster caused by human inventions destroys humans. Truly. Honestly...I think we should be told the truth about the radiation, then if we must correct something, we can fix it.”

Yuko Sato: “About three days before the earthquake, there were some warning signs in the sky. The *tawaragumo* [special type of cloud] were gathering. One, two, ten, then hundreds and thousands gathered. I thought it was very strange and told my mom that a big earthquake might be coming, so she gathered up some important documents and things and wrapped them in a *furoshiki* [cloth]. I told her the earthquake might come at night, so keep it close by your bedside.”

Mrs. Sato: “Bank papers, house documents, our stamp, money, and those things. After three days nothing happened, so I put them back in the wardrobe. Everything was organized to bring, but they pulled me out of the house and I couldn’t bring anything with me. Nothing!”



13. KUNIO SAITO

Watari, Miyagi prefecture

Community leader and owner of an audio equipment rental business

“When I saw all the dogs that died because they were tied up, I felt really sad. On YouTube, when I reported that my dog was gone, some people commented that people are more important than dogs...but I wish people could understand that dogs are family members, too.”



14. CHIEKO SHOUGI

Arahama, Miyagi prefecture

69-year-old housewife and neighborhood watch leader

“Before the tsunami, I was a member of a volunteer group and visited many people to talk about various things, including what to do in an earthquake, and I was supposed to contact them in event of an emergency. But the tsunami happened on the day my husband and I went to Sendai City to file our tax return... 186 people died around my area. I failed all those people. I cannot forget this fact for the rest of my life. I am very sorry and apologize to them for my failure. The fact that I survived is unforgivable. As long as I live, I must do something to make up for that.”



15. KUMI KUMADA

Marumori, Miyagi prefecture

Teacher and mother of seven children aged 4 to 16

“The date of the earthquake, the March 11 night, everybody moved to the emergency evacuation shelter. We didn’t have any batteries for a radio and no electricity to charge cell phones, so for days the only source of information we got was from the newspapers. They delivered the newspaper from the city every day to the emergency shelter. When I read, ‘Yesterday there was a nuclear power plant explosion,’ my heart ripped right out of me. It was already the next day after the explosion when we would know about it. I felt so regretful and scared because on the day of the highest radiation, I made my children spend the whole day outside!

“It’s now two years later and it’s still stressful. I don’t know what foods are safe to buy and what I can’t cook for my children. But Koji [her husband] says, ‘Let’s not think about how much more radiation they get, but let’s try to think how much we can reduce the radiation that our kids get.’ Does that make sense?

“All parents here with children have lots of these inner struggles. When I think about it, I go crazy. In this situation, you can’t just trust or rely on the government anymore. I believe only God is always protecting us. I put my trust in God, so that is the only reason why I can stay here.”



16. TOSHINORI YATSU

Marumori, Miyagi prefecture

60-year-old bamboo farmer

“Marumori is 50 kilometers [31 miles] away from the Fukushima nuclear accident. It’s not only the distance but also the wind direction that matters. More radiation came here with the wind than got to some places closer to the accident site and entered into our bamboo forests. This spring, we couldn’t sell the bamboo. If there is one farm with a high radiation reading, then everyone in the area cannot sell. My grandfather and father used to do bamboo farming, too. Our children left and won’t be coming back from the city, so my wife and I will be the last to produce bamboo here. I feel sad about that, too.”



17. AKIRATORU MONMA

Minamisoma, Fukushima prefecture

Head of the samurai Soma Nomaai

“Our samurai ancestors came to Soma with Lord Taira no Masakado over 1,075 years ago. The first time I joined Nomaai [a sacred samurai event] was when I was only three years old. My grandfather led the horse by the rein with me riding. Now my great-grandchild is three years old. I want to be standing beside him on the horse, but because of the nuclear plant accident, it is not possible for him to be here.

“I want to fight back. It’s our soul, our traditional Nomaai culture. My samurai spirit makes me determined to keep going for the future.”



18. YASUYUKI KOWATA

Odaka (no-go zone), Fukushima prefecture

62-year-old wedding planner and karaoke singer from Namie, whose wife passed away in 2013

“What I think on the outside and what I feel inside are totally different. To be honest, I struggle inside. Right after the nuclear accident, I made myself sing. Yes. That’s all I could do. Make myself sing. I sang this song with a strong, soft voice full of my feelings. That’s all I could do.”



19. TOSHINORI ITAKURA

Odaka (no-go zone), Fukushima prefecture

31-year-old, member of a samurai family

“I have lived here since I was born. In the evening of March 12, our life stopped. There was an order to evacuate every resident from our town. We can’t go back in time concerning the nuclear accident, but we do have a future. We still do not know the effects of this radiation. This is why, through our experience, people in the world can learn more about these issues and effects. Please do not waste our lives.”

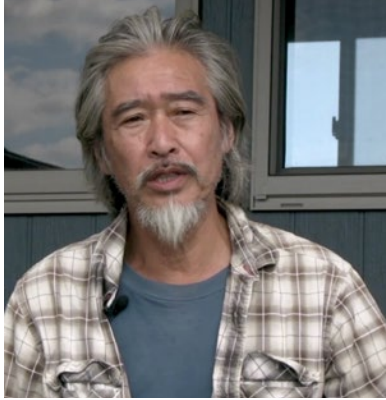


20. KAZUNOBU SAKURAI

Minamisoma, Fukushima prefecture

Mayor, philosopher, and organic farmer

“Everything is a challenge in life, but we cannot function well with bitter feelings. If you have to face some difficulties or disaster, you can easily feel you’re a victim. That feeling is strong. But a victim of who? TEPCO [Tokyo Electric Power Company]? The government? Nature? If you dwell on negative blaming too much, it drains you dry, and then you don’t have enough energy to move forward. Every morning when I wake up, I go jogging for 40 minutes. My bad or negative feelings are released when I sweat, and it refreshes my mind and body to help me feel positive for the job we face here.”



21. KENJI YAMASHIRO

Odaka (no-go zone), Fukushima prefecture

Yoga instructor and long term volunteer from another part of Japan

“In July 2011, I came here on foot to help, pulling a cart. I wanted to teach yoga at the emergency shelters because the people were suffering so much stress and trauma. In the first months, people rejected me...and now I do yoga many times a week in five different places. People can’t sleep because of their fears, and when we started yoga, they said to me, ‘After yoga, I can sleep for two nights.’”

In February 2014, Kenji died in his tent in an Odaka, Fukushima, field during a heavy winter blizzard.

From his last interview: “This will be my third winter here. I always wished to be an artist one day. When I lived in India, Iyengar, my teacher and the founder of Iyengar yoga, said to me, ‘What you do is the art of giving to the gods.’ I don’t know if a god exists or not, but I want to think my way of living is the art.”

22. SUNAO KATO

Odaka, Fukushima prefecture

Barber living in a deserted town near the damaged nuclear power plant



“I am the oldest of five brothers. When you are the oldest one in the family in Japan, it is your responsibility to take over the family business, like it or not. Before it was just work, work, work. Now I enjoy every little thing, and my priorities in life have been changed by this disaster. I am much happier. One rice ball makes me happy now. And if we have homemade pickles with the rice, I feel like I’m lucky. If there’s some meat, I feel even more lucky. That’s all. It’s that simple.”



23/24. FUKUSHIMA MOTHERS

Iwaki, Fukushima prefecture

Note: these are excerpts from a conversation between two Fukushima mothers. After interviews, they feared further abuse from their families and employers, so they requested that their names not appear in the film. At the same time, they felt it was important to speak the truth about their experiences.

Mother 1: “People were so afraid of Chernobyl, but people aren’t afraid of Fukushima. I don’t understand why. They are using different senses when they look at the two.”

Mother 2: “A few weeks after the nuclear accident, the government and administration reopened schools before it was considered completely safe. Unfortunately, the children here were used in a PR campaign to express that things were safe. I was upset that the children’s safety was compromised, and I lost my trust of those in charge. I realized that mothers can help change the future with the actions that we take now. That’s why we must keep telling our experiences so this won’t happen again to others. People are forgetting about us. As Fukushima people, we have to make our voices heard until we die.”