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2022



A film by **JUICHIRO YAMASAKI**

YAMABUKI

PRESSKIT





FILM UNION MANIWA and SURVIVANCE present

YAMABUKI

A film by **JUICHIRO YAMASAKI**



2022 / Japan, France / 97 minutes / colour / 1:1.5 / DCP (shot on 16mm) / 5.1ch
Languages: Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese
yamabuki-film.com





Yamabuki [*kerria japonica*] is a flower
which blossoms each spring,
discreetly on the mountainside,
in humble places with dim sunlight.

SYNOPSIS

A small town in the mountains of western Japan, Maniwa. Chang-su, a former Olympic jockey for the South Korea national team, burdened with huge debts due to his father's failed business, works at a quarry site. He lives with Minami and her infant daughter, who fled her husband and his family seven years ago. Meanwhile, Yamabuki, a high school girl who lost her mother and lives with her policeman father, begins silent standing protests spontaneously at a crossroad, thinking of issues beyond the ocean. Unbeknown to them, the lives of Chang-su, Yamabuki and other townspeople quietly begin to intersect.





JUICHIRO YAMASAKI

Biography

Born in 1978, in the city of Osaka, Japan. During his studies in anthropology at Kyoto Bunkyo University, he directed short films and participated in the programming of the Kyoto International Student Film Festival. In 2006, he moved to his father's home village in the mountains of Maniwa, Okayama. In 2007, while working as a tomato farmer, he founded the film production and screening group Cinemaniwa with local friends. In 2011, he directed his first feature film, *The Sound of Light*, a drama about a young dairy farmer in Maniwa, which was invited to the Rotterdam International Film Festival and the Tokyo International Film Festival. His second feature film, *Sanchu Uprising: Voice at Dawn* (2014), a period film about the peasant revolt that happened in Maniwa during the 18th century, was released in 2014. In 2021, he completed his third feature film, *Yamabuki*, shot in 16mm and still set in Maniwa

Filmography

2021 *Yamabuki*
2014 *Sanchu Uprising: Voice at Dawn*
2011 *The Sound of Light*
2008 *The Fall Leaves* (medium-length film)





INTERVIEW WITH JUICHIRO YAMASAKI

What was the starting point for *Yamabuki*?

There were several impetus. At the time there was a lot of talk about the Olympics that were to take place in Tokyo in a climate that made me feel uneasy. I felt the need to shoot instead of just sitting back watching. But most of all, I was inspired by the people I met in the town of Maniwa, the mountainous countryside where I live and where I shot *Yamabuki*.

In particular, I met Kang Yoon-soo, a Korean actor who came to Maniwa with his family of four, with whom he had no blood relation. I was intrigued by his story, which led him to move from one place to another and end up in Maniwa. I wanted to write a character around this figure, and cast him in the role of Chang-su. Another important element is the plant called *yamabuki* [*kerria japonica*], which blossoms every year in spring. There are many of them in Maniwa. In Japan, cherry blossoms usually flower around the same time and attract people, but not the *yamabuki*.

I find it very beautiful to see it blossom on the slopes of mountains, discreetly, in humble places with little sunlight. On the other hand, I discovered that the word *yamabuki* was once used to name the old Japanese currency in slang, which enabled to evoke the economic

dimension that is significant in the film. I liked this idea of the parallel between the discreet but powerful charm of the *yamabuki* that persist and the possibility of evoking certain discreet lives that survive thanks to their strength and vitality. More generally, I also wanted to confront the fact that I'm making films while working.

Can you tell us what your work consists of?

I'm a farmer. This is my livelihood. I have a small farm where I grow tomatoes, so I can survive. I also organise film screenings.

Why did you make your protagonist a Korean worker? How did you develop this character?

At first, I didn't think I would get attached to a specific character. I imagined writing something more choral, but the character of Chang-su appealed to me because he's someone who moves. I'm interested in the movement of people and things. Through him I could symbolise the question of where one wants to live, and with whom. In the course of a life there are moves that are sometimes happy and others are less so, more forced. Some people go abroad to look for work, while others are driven out of their country.



I mentioned the Olympics. It turns out that in order for them to take place, infrastructures had to be built in Tokyo, and to do this they dug into the mountains, all over Japan. They were transformed into gravel which was then used to make concrete to build these infrastructures. The mountains and the stones were moved to Tokyo, but also the people for economic reasons, because they brought in labour from the provinces. These displacements towards the capital because of the Olympics made me feel very uneasy. That's why this issue is present in the background. On the other hand, when I was thinking of addressing the issue of the Olympics, I realised that horse riding was represented. This created a link. There's also the fact that in Maniwa there's a riding school. Many families with children go there to see the horses. There's also an Olympic jockey who trains there. Also, horse riding is usually reserved for members of the privileged classes. I was interested in using this detail to describe Chang-su's background to show where he came from and to better embody him.

So the idea of making Chang-su a quarry worker is more related to the issue of the Olympics?

Initially, indeed, it had to do with the Olympics. That said, in Maniwa there's also a quarry which is a kind of hidden place and which embodies something rather sad and melancholic.

There's a fatalistic dimension to Chang-su's fate. It's because of the mountain that he gets injured and further deprived of work. But it's also the mountain that miraculously grants him money. We are struck by the complete lack of control he seems to have over his fate.

In fact, in view of his path so far, we can say that he's a character who's subjected to outside forces that have pushed him to follow this fate. That said, what I also show in the film is that he tries to fight back, to get out of this situation. We don't really know what happens to him at the end, it's not shown and I don't know myself. Listening to you, I think that his fall is inexorable. And when you start to fall, you don't stop, it's a downward spiral, until you hold on to something, which is what the film shows.



You use the motif of the fall in a very symbolic and visual way through the suitcase of money that falls from the mountain and reproduces the fall of the stones. How did you come up with this idea?

As far as the falling rocks are concerned, my inspiration came from the fact that in Maniwa, which is in a mountainous area, there are a lot of signs on the side on the roadside warning of falling rocks. It's a bit absurd because if a rock falls onto you there's not much you can do. But as these are steep roads where you drive on the side of the mountain it's quite dangerous. Sometimes there are accidents and even deaths because of rockslides. As for the money that falls from the mountain, the idea came to me when I visited this quarry. When I was writing I wanted to use this dynamic, which I found very cinematographic and which I integrated into the script.

The other significant character in the film is the young girl whose first name is the name of the flower. Her presence becomes more and more important as the story progresses. Even though she doesn't come from the same background, we feel that she follows a parallel path to Chang-su. They cross paths but only become aware of each other's existence towards the end.

Originally, instead of Yamabuki's character, I wanted to portray her mother. I had seen a report on television about the disappearance of a Japanese war correspondent. She was a very real character. I remember that in this documentary you could see her parents testify. They were obviously in tears, and at the same time they testified to their daughter's determination to do her job no matter what it took. There was a mixture of pride and admiration for her. I was struck by the idea of being so enamoured of justice that someone would leave everything behind to go to places in crisis. I was sensitive to this impulse and I had this character in mind while writing. In real life, this journalist had no daughter, but I was interested in Yamabuki's character questioning her mother's career and choices. So we see her participating in demonstrations. It turns out that near Maniwa there are also silent protests of this kind. For the main activist, who is always present, I was



inspired by a real person. When I was talking to her, she explained that sometimes high school students would join her and that they probably found an answer to their desire for justice. Demonstrating in such a remote place as Maniwa may seem absurd, but people gather anyway. It just so happens that these demonstrations take place at a crossroad and that it's a place of great symbolic significance. It's at this very spot that Chang-su and Yamabuki meet near the end of the film. On the other hand, even if it's not shown in the film, Yamabuki's father who's a policeman, uses this crossroad as well as the other characters. In short, this crossroad is a symbolic place where people of different ideologies and origins meet, coexisting in this small rural town.

You also show the reactionary speeches that these demonstrations trigger. One can hear hate speeches towards foreigners. Was this also a way of showing the tensions within Japanese society?

This was particularly the case at the time of shooting. There was a heavy climate in Japan with a lot of hate speeches and racism towards foreigners. There was a real radicalisation of these xenophobic discourses. Even though it wasn't happening in my city, I saw several videos on YouTube of this kind.

I thought to myself that I couldn't ignore this phenomenon.

In a way, the relationship between Yamabuki and her boyfriend, who end up breaking up when he tells her he's going to join the Japan Self-Defence Forces (JSDF), is a way of synthesising these opposing polarities within the frame of the story.

This is an important point. Nevertheless, there is a first couple that already embodies this antagonism, that of Yamabuki's parents, since her mother is a war correspondent and an independent professional, while her father's a policeman and embodies the authority of the state. The next generation is that of Yamabuki, who seems to want to follow a path that can be described as "progressive". Her boyfriend is the eldest son of a traditional, provincial-minded family. He has no desire to leave his native region. He carries a sense of family and ends up joining the JSDF. What interested me was to show that beyond ideologies, beyond convictions, we should be able to love one another even if we don't share the same ideas. This is what this young couple embodies in a way.



Your characters are never one-dimensional, they are in the process of becoming, filled by contradictions, like the police officer father who feels compassion for Chang-su and relieves his conscience by deciding to let him go free, overriding the law he embodies.

Above all, I believe that people are liable to change. They change in the course of life but also through encounters. I believe that you can be influenced by someone. We were talking about displacement, and the fact that an elsewhere comes to us. This creates possibilities of change and evolution in each of us. The idea was to say that it's absurd to judge others through an ideology or a profession.

It's the moment when the film shifts towards the oneiric. You introduce the character of the war correspondent mother. Yamabuki leaves reality but also seems to follow in her mother's footsteps when she puts on her scarf and treads into the desert.

This scene can be interpreted several ways. I'm not sure I can provide an unequivocal reading of it. One can imagine that she leaves for the desert in the footsteps of her mother, but one can also imagine that she leaves this world by renouncing this life which isn't worth it. That said, between the sequence of the father's preach and the moment when we see him cry, there's a dreamlike passage in which we

see Yamabuki going into the desert. We can therefore imagine that she's leaving this world, but this remains confined to a fantasy world. It doesn't necessarily mean that she leaves it in the literal sense. These are possibilities that are part of a fantasised moment before a return to the real. One can also think that she takes a sharp look at the world when she turns away from the frame and chooses her own path. I have deliberately left some ambiguity so that each viewer can make up their own interpretation.

There's an aesthetic tension between a desire to represent reality literally and to escape from it. You also introduced animated sequences directed by Sébastien Laudenbach in the opening and closing credits. Why did you make this choice?

I wanted people to feel that the film was above all a fiction. It made sense to frame this story as if it were contained between the covers of a book. Of course, the story described inside is one with a social dimension and a heavy and sometimes tragic theme. It's also about love. But I wanted to give it this wrapping, that of a book cover which is the frame of fiction. Sébastien is a master animator, and he has a very subtle way of depicting nature. I was very happy that he accepted. I told him that all the characters in



the film are like the yamabuki, the wild flower that blooms in the shade, and I asked him to draw the flowers as if they were smiling at those who had just lived before us.

The music also introduces a certain distortion between reality and imagination. It's unusual in the choice of tones with crystalline, metallic and percussive sounds. What instructions did you give to your composer Olivier Deparis?

I made the film without any music in mind, but I wanted to introduce a little humour and irony, which music allows, because the film was tending too much towards the dramatic. It was at risk of becoming heavy. The music became a counterpoint to add more lightness and distance. Together with Olivier and Terutarô Osanaï, my producer, we discussed it a lot. We came up with the idea of using the toy piano as an instrument to restore the innocence of a child playing on a miniature piano. I told Olivier that I wanted the music to be about innocent angels who play tricks on the destiny of the protagonists, and he did an excellent job.

In the film you question the notion of family through Chang-su's need of belonging but also through the confrontation between Yamabuki and her father. There is also Jin, the Chinese prostitute whose Japanese father is absent, not to mention the relationship between Minami and her ex-husband. The film takes place in a deeply patriarchal Japanese society, but it also shows independent women like Yamabuki and her mother. At the centre is Chang-su, who's looking for a family. How did you come up with the idea of Chang-su's character, who's constantly on a quest for a family?

At the beginning I was concerned with people who wanted to start a family but couldn't do so for economic reasons. I want it to be a simple thing, living with the people you love. No one should be prevented from starting one because of economic or social issues. On the other hand, family is, ironically, also an economic and social institution. For Chang-su, the ideal is simply to live with the people you love, which can be an illusion. But even so, Chang-su is obsessed with it. For me, it's an obsession for life. I wanted to portray complex families because I wanted to show the obsession for life through people who had to choose a difficult path. I believe this obsession is the charm of humanity. Of course, it would be better if there were



no obstacles preventing people who love each other from being together. But, unfortunately, there are still obstacles in our society, such as wrong and discriminatory practices and systems. I would like people to pay attention to this.

Did you draw on your personal experience with your daughter to describe the relationship between Chang-su and his adopted daughter?

Yes, absolutely. In the film the daughter calls Chang-su *Ō-chan*. Japanese children usually call their father *Tō-chan* which is a contraction of *Otō-chan* which means *daddy*, but they don't pronounce the first O. The little girl's character by calling him that has taken away a letter, because he's not quite her father yet. My daughter also calls me that, she never calls me "dad". So I was inspired directly by my relationship with her.

Interview by Dimitri Ianni
Interpretation: Léa Le Dimna





CAST

Kang Yoon-soo, Kilala Inori, Yohta Kawase, Misa Wada,
Masaki Miura
Hisao Kurozumi, Mayumi Sakura, Riho Shamura,
Maki Nishiyama, Tomomi Chida, Eiri Okura,
Yuya Matsuura and Munetaka Aoki

CREW

SCREENPLAY AND DIRECTOR Juichiro Yamasaki
PRODUCERS Terutarô Osanaï, Shoko Akamatsu,
Atsuto Watanabe, Takeshi Masago, Juichiro Yamasaki
LINE PRODUCER Daika Matsukura
CINEMATOGRAPHY Kenta Tawara
LIGHTNING Yusuke Fukuda
SOUND MIXER Masami Samukawa
PRODUCTION DESIGNER Risshi Nishimura
CHIEF ASSISTANT DIRECTOR Hirofumi Kagawa
COSTUME DESIGNER Kei Taguchi
HAIR & MAKE-UP ARTIST Miwako Sugahara
SOUND DESIGNER Takao Kondo
MUSIC Olivier Deparis
ANIMATION Sébastien Laudenbach
EDITING CONSULTANTS Yann Dedet, Minori Akimoto

Production companies: Film Union Maniwa, Survivance

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