

# GREEN JAIL: TAIWANESE MEMORIES BURIED IN AN OKINAWAN MINE

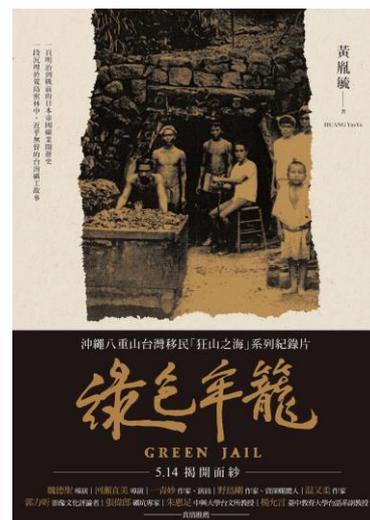
## 綠色牢籠：埋藏於沖繩西表島礦坑的台灣記憶

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*Documentary filmmaker Huang Yin-Yu beautifully narrates the behind-the-scenes story of the seven years spent planning, coordinating, filming, and producing the documentary Green Jail. Follow the author's journey in bringing this compelling, little-known corner of history from drawing table to finished documentary film.*

Iriomote in Japan's southern Okinawa Island chain is covered in dense Amazon-esque forest. Few remember now, but, before the war, this island was home to a notorious mining operation where laborers from Kyushu, other Okinawa islands, and the then-Japanese-colonies of Taiwan and Chosen (Korea) were sent by the thousands to work the mines, living precarious and wretched lives. Documentary filmmaker Huang Yin-Yu invests his highly honed curiosity to this filmmaking odyssey and consummate professional skill in connecting each step in the post-production process. Huang's eponymously titled book *Green Jail* narrates the author's unfolding thoughts and emotions while making this important work.

As in many of his previous films, Director Huang centers *Green Jail's* expansive narrative on a central figure, in this case Granny Hashima. Born in Taiwan, she was brought to Iriomote by her stepfather and mine-labor recruiter Yang Tien-Fu when just ten years old as a future wife for his young son. Illiterate, rarely seeing other island residents, and her children now long gone, Granny Hashima holds to her lonely post, watching over the family home and the graves of her adoptive parents. As she reflects



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on her long life, emotions difficult to put to words clutter her mind. It is when memories of her adoptive father take the fore that the history and stories of the miners of Iriomote begin to emerge in vivid relief.

Granny Hashima is a firsthand witness to and survivor of Iriomote's mining heritage. Her memories of banal, everyday events, inadvertently remembered as oral history, provide a sturdy throughline that, together with other historical information and interviews, fills a gap in our historical understanding and awareness. We can now appreciate that this island, today overrun with trees and vegetation, was once home to many who sacrificed their youth, and for some their lives, in involuntary service to those intent on extracting the island's subterranean riches. For countless workers, Iriomote was indeed their green prison.

## Huang Yin-Yu 黃胤毓

Born in Taitung County and a long-time resident of Japan, Huang Yin-Yu is an accomplished director and producer as well as the founder of Moolin Films (Taiwan) and Moolin Production (Japan). He has been engaged in documentary film work since 2010, with one of his films earning finalist status in the Swiss Visions du Réel Film Festival. Huang began work in 2013 on his continuing series of films focused on Taiwanese prewar migration to the Yaeyama Archipelago in Okinawa and subsequent historical issues.

# GREEN JAIL: TAIWANESE MEMORIES BURIED IN AN OKINAWAN MINE

By Huang Yin-Yu

Translated by Mike Fu

## Preface: Days of Glittering Waves

Perhaps one day I'll remember my time with *Green Jail* in this way: a period in my youth when I met someone much older, who taught me all sorts of things about the past and inspired me to live for the future. Why did I cling desperately to these people near the end of their lives, following them with a sense of urgency, hoping that they'd be able to tell me just a bit more? Over the past years, I've often been asked this question about my documentary ethics: Was I merely using a helpless old person to attain my own perspective on history, as if she were an object of academic research? Was I exploiting her emotions in order to obtain my materials and narrative? While I found these kinds of questions offensive, I couldn't help but wonder: What am I really looking for? What part of this work still feels incomplete?

Time. All of these questions return to the theme of time. While editing and organizing materials, I found myself revisiting the seven years we had spent making *Green Jail*, our tracks all over Iriomote Island and other areas, the countless mornings and afternoons with Granny Hashima, and the forgotten slivers of time that had been condensed in my memory. I realized that I was no longer the same young man who'd sat behind a table, waiting to meet Granny's gaze from beside my camera. I'd also grown up, and become an objective observer. I sat in front of the editing computer determining what was valuable, deciding which images could be used and which could not. I've moved on from this film; *Green Jail* was finally completed, and this book is more or less a very long farewell letter to this project and a testament to the memories made along the way.

So, I'll treat this book as a long letter to Granny then. I hope that Granny, who never even got to see the film, can forgive my selfishness and remember instead the pure and simple relationship we shared during our time together. I suppose documentaries are fundamentally complicated like this. How I treasure my student days, when I had a simple, straightforward relationship with my subjects and was as of yet unconcerned with such things as film companies, distribution, copyrights, and film festivals. Nonetheless, the film we ended up making did eventually get watched and scrutinized.

What you don't see in the documentary are the experiences my cameraman partner Nakatani Shungo and I shared as classmates in university, as we created our company, and as we

worked together on Okinawa's Yaeyama Islands. During this period, we established a relationship with the local landscape that bore traces of our student days and our amiable dynamic, which still persists to this day. This place in Japan is like my second home. It taught me how to treat others and manage my affairs; it taught us the value of time.

*Wild Mountains over the Sea* is the title I've given to this documentary series about Taiwanese immigrants to the Yaeyama Islands. Beginning in early 2013, I spent about a year traveling all over Japan to interview the immigrants and descendants of immigrants connected to this piece of history. Between 2015 and 2016, I completed the first part with *After Spring, the Tamaki Family...*, which focused on the Tamaki family's trip to discover their roots in Taiwan and make sense of their elders' emigration experience during the 1980s. As for *Green Jail*, I had worked on it from 2014 until Granny Hashima's passing in 2018, then spent several more years on historical research, one year preparing and shooting reenactments, and one year on editing and post-production, finally completing the film at the beginning of 2021. The third and final film in the series will follow a group of third and fourth-generation young people of Taiwanese descent, members of the Yaeyama Islands branch of the Ryukyu Overseas Chinese Association, over several years. Filming is expected to wrap up in 2023.

During our film work and investigations, we'd take the forty-minute ferry from Ishigaki Island to Iriomote Island, rocking back and forth, feeling at once dizzy and sleepy. When we arrived, it was like entering a whole other world. The scenery and natural environment, the ferocious tropical plants, and the coastal road devoid of people remain vividly in our minds. To cut down on costs, we always took the long route, traveling south to Ohara Port, where rental cars were cheap. Then, we'd set out from the starting point of the coastal road, driving an hour and a half to reach its end at Shirahama, the village where Granny Hashima lived.

Those days of scorching sunlight and glittering waves were sometimes so hot that it looked like a colorless energy was about to spark flames onto the road before us. It was blazingly hot, a summer with no end in sight. Of course, we also experienced winters filled with cold and rain. But in my mind, Iriomote will always be a place of fiery heat. The signal on the car radio would cut out intermittently. When we did have signal, we could pick up local stations from the main island of Okinawa, United Front Radio from Fujian Province on the mainland, and regional stations from Yilan or Hualien. Sometimes it was hard to tell which was which.

These long journeys of anticipation on the road to Granny's place were so serene, with no pressing matters to discuss and beautiful weather all the way. Occasionally we'd even encounter an endangered eagle on the road. The massive "green jail" behind this island, its history from the Meiji period to the imperialist expansion before World War II, the countless souls who were sacrificed to develop the mines here, and the *yakuza*-like social structure that leveraged the island's isolation – as times have changed, these pieces of the past have vanished into thin air, with no one even left to mourn their disappearance. The place has since transformed into a massive landscape of ruins within a wilderness. Meanwhile, we were driving our car to the other side of the island to the village of Shirahama, which had been founded to support the mining industry, in order to interview our sole protagonist, Granny Hashima Yoshiko (Chiang Shih Tuan).

From her eighty-eighth year of life until she passed away at ninety-two, in her long and solitary old age, we shared a handful of small, practically inconsequential moments together.

But I hope that these moments can become a testimony to a particular period in time, and a valuable message to contemporary society.

## Chapter 1: Shirahama

The first time I came to Shirahama, I simply couldn't believe these islands were right there before my eyes. From Shirahama you have a clear view of these uninhabited islands across the water: Uchibanari Island, the island right next to the inner bay, looks at first glance almost like a mountain range in the sea. Most of the mines before the war had been on Uchibanari, which back then had a population of more than two thousand. It lived up to its name as Island of the Mines. Once upon a time, it had been so brightly lit that it appeared like an industrial metropolis on the sea. Shirahama, meanwhile, was a major port on the western coast of Iriomote, the harbor from which the mining companies exported huge amounts of coal. Nowadays, only a single village remains, couched in the natural landscape like a *genkan*, or entry hall, to the "last secret place in Japan". This village, Funauki, can only be reached by boat. Divers and rafters who come after hearing of its reputation carry out preliminary exercises around here on the coast before heading into deeper, more secret places for further exploration.

The mines were disbanded during the war, and the village of Shirahama burned down completely in air raids. This had never been anyone's ancestral home. The residents who had moved here from various parts of Japan to meet the demands of the burgeoning mining industry dispersed or fled to their hometowns. After the war, only a tiny number of people returned, their past having already become a long-buried secret.

The neighboring uninhabited island is called Sotobanari Island. There used to be a few scattered mines, but it's long been an island devoid of human activity. The island became infamous for an *ojisan* who had once lived there completely naked, embracing a primitive lifestyle after the war. Supposedly, an English television station had come all the way just to interview him. In recent years, the now quite elderly *ojisan* moved elsewhere, leaving behind his uninhabited kingdom where it seems only wild animals and forests remain.

Shirahama and these two islands are closely dependent on each other. When viewed from above, the three look like a mountain range partitioned by the sea. The distance between them reminds me of being in Granny Hashima's home in Shirahama, talking about things of the past that linger in her mind, so close and yet so far, inside the blurred boundaries between history and memory. In order to reach the Island of the Mines of our imagination, however, we still needed a boat and a guide. When I first began filming, I was hoping to stay in the tranquility of Granny's home and didn't feel quite ready for a long journey. But the booming noise of port construction beyond the window felt like a constant reminder to me that this was a harbor village, and we would ultimately have to depart.

## 01. Granny Hashima's Home

Granny's home was a dim, dark place, with funeral portraits of her parents and husband who died young on the wall. An elderly woman living by herself, she safeguarded this house that her foster parents had built by hand. Everything was dilapidated and badly damaged, or long fallen into disuse. The house itself, its wooden floorboards, the old table, cupboards, and family photographs that hung on the wall – all of these were keys to unlocking Granny's many memories and stories. The house seemed to speak of Granny's long life as a *sin-pū-á* daughter, betrothed to marriage since childhood.

*Back in the day it was called "Dead Man's Cave", so who would have dared to come? They said it was called Ryukyu, and it was a deadly place.*

*In the beginning, my friend said to me, "Your dad is bringing you there to die!" I said, "What the hell are you talking about! Speaking such nonsense before I've even gone." That's how I got in a fight with this friend.*

*Going to Iriomote is going to Dead Man's Cave, the friend says to me. Whoever goes there dies! What kind of person has the guts to go here?*

—interview with Hashima Yoshiko, 2015

I came to this place for the first time in January 2014 to visit Granny Hashima, who was then eighty-eight. It certainly wasn't the first time Granny had been interviewed. Previously there'd been a television station and a reporter who'd found out about her adoptive father Yang Tien-Fu, the last Taiwanese person to serve as a *kinsakibori*, a main contractor or foreman, in the mines on Iriomote. The whole family was cloaked in mystery, both to the other residents of the island and to the researchers and interviewers who came from afar.

But as for me, what drew my attention most was the unique atmosphere of this old house: Taiwanese in appearance but impossible to describe with any accuracy. What manifested within this ancient home were memories, messy and entangled like overgrown weeds. The Hashima family had been in the village of Shirahama since the mining era before World War II and had returned to Taiwan afterward. Following the February 28<sup>th</sup> massacre, they stowed away and came back to Iriomote, where they lived through the "Yaeyama Development" project during the American occupation era and then through the myriad changes that came with Okinawa's return to Japanese rule. These memories were so heavy, and yet this house bore the dreams and aspirations of Taiwanese people who wanted to set down roots on this island, demonstrating resilience and perseverance in their fervent desire to create a space of their own.

Later on, I would conduct countless interviews sitting at the only table in this old house. They were all shot from the same camera angle and position. Those interviews continued until just months before Granny passed away. This was the bulk of the footage used in *Green Jail*: shots

taken over the years, all from the same position and same angle. We often talked about “things from the past”: Granny’s third son who went “inland” (what Okinawans call the main Japanese island of Honshu) and never came back; the eldest son vaccinated by a military doctor upon returning to Taiwan after the war and inadvertently becoming infected with polio; and trivial matters concerning the other children who didn’t make it into the final documentary. Granny addressed her own parents in Taiwanese as *iúnn-pē* or *iúnn-bú*, underscoring the fact that she’d been adopted. In Japanese, she called them *jiisan* and *baasan*, terms typically denoting grandparents. But she never once referred to them as her mother and father. When I’d ask about her *otousan*, or simply “father”, she’d think of the biological family she’d been with for only three days; family members she could recall from childhood but never saw again after growing up.

Perhaps because I was always asking about things from the past, details about Granny’s adoptive father and mother became clearer over time. Sometimes I felt like I could look right through the ninety-something Granny who sat before me and see the little girl who’d been brought to this unfamiliar island, the one who had been so fearful and reliant on her parents. With her incredibly sharp tongue, Granny often sounded like she was telling someone off when she spoke Taiwanese. At the same time, it also seemed like she was protecting her family, her words revealing the vulnerability of someone who has suffered.

*Not one of us went to school, nor set foot in a classroom. “Coal mine people,” they called you. “Ore-mining lowlives.”*

*Just from looking at you, they wanted to whoop you or throw stones at you. They’d tie up a whole bundle of firewood, toss the whole thing at you. How’s it possible they could still hit us from that distance?*

*That was how they bullied us. Even if I met ‘em now, I still got nothing to say.*

—interview with Hashima Yoshiko, 2015

How could she not feel resentment for all these episodes from the past, these things that remained vivid to her and that she still brooded on so many decades later. On the other hand, she barely remembered anything when it came to recent events. When I first started going to Granny’s home, I discovered that she didn’t seem to know what year or month it was. The calendar always seemed to be open to several months back.

Time was at a standstill. This must have been the first impression I formed of this old house. Time was like Granny’s memory, frozen along the borders of this island. This house was simply an unremarkable place at the end of a road in the mountains, a place with a sign indicating indefinite “BLOCKED PASSAGE” due to long years of disrepair. Everything here was like a last witness to that piece of history, now dwelling in quiet solitude; from the topography of the land to its location and from the exterior of the house to Granny herself, who never left home.

What about Granny's children then? She used to tell me that she had "around" five children. In reality, excluding her Taiwanese adopted son (who'd passed away in 1970), her estranged older son, and her third son who'd disappeared, there remained only three children, and they rarely returned to Iriomote. Granny could barely recall her grandchildren's names, how many she had, and things like that.

Granny's memory was thick and strong, her disputes and resentments too many to keep track of. I had to interview her so many times, again and again, to gradually put together a complete picture. Looking back at my interview footage from 2014 and 2015, it dawned upon me that those two years had been spent painstakingly reconstructing and researching Granny Hashima's life. Like an elementary school student who has just learned to read, I was anxiously chasing after my stern teacher for approval, groping blindly in the dark. When this story that took years to uncover finally saw the full light of day, it would necessarily be exceedingly thick, impossible to dilute.

The interviews after 2016 became an entirely different psychological battlefield. I scoured these long interviews for any trace and any hint of real voices within the subconscious mind. Is there such a thing as a complete picture of history? Within personal histories and the memories of our elders are dark corners where light has never shone before, where there are scattered fragments that simply cannot be pieced together into a whole. I never fretted about the position of my camera, nor did I overthink every frame and aspect of the production. The only thing I wanted to do was to use my interview time wisely, sit where I always sat, ask a few more questions, listen to a few more answers. At the beginning of 2016, I finally gained entrance to the shadowy places of Granny Hashima's memory: hearsay and testimonies about miners and the mining era, real feelings about her children who'd scattered to the winds. Those "unspeakable" things were like a narrow entrance into the tunnel of memory. What I glimpsed behind that door were the incomprehensible matters that had kept Granny up at night, tossing and turning for untold decades.

*Lying in bed, I think about when I came over from Taiwan, what this and that was like, and I can't sleep the whole night because of it.*

—interview with Hashima Yoshiko, 2014

I spent so many hours pondering Granny's relationship with her adoptive father, Yang Tien-Fu. From Granny's perspective, it was his parental love that had protected her and her family to this day. It had raised her and kept her safe ever since she was brought to this island when she was ten, after being given up by her birth parents. Granny was illiterate, and she never went to school after coming to Iriomote. She was reared at home and rarely went out, but you might say she was a bit spoiled. Though Granny didn't understand History, per se, she had plenty of her own complicated entanglements throughout its twists and turns. I believed it imperative to portray some of these entanglements in my film – what was incomprehensible was a person facing an

“inexplicable” outcome, with no choice but to swallow it whole, without any understanding of its cause or the things that had led to this moment. Why? A hundred thousand whys had kept Granny up at night these past decades, tossing and turning. The one thing that kept coming out was simply, “Why?” History, that great wheel of time, had let the Hashima family stay on this far-flung island, protecting them across the eras, even producing wrinkles and scars that belonged to their personal family history over the span of several generations.

What I sought was the meaning of these wrinkles, what they indicated about things that had happened behind the scenes. I fully believed Granny had witnessed things that were inexplicable to her. Or, perhaps over the course of those long eras in which she busied herself with the task of living, the twists and turns of her family, practically chemical reactions, became sealed memories that were unspeakable and incomprehensible.

The first wrinkle came one day when I was bringing Granny to visit someone. We were talking about something or other in the car, and Granny suddenly said, “I did all sorts of grueling work so my kids could go to college, but they turned out to be so unfilial after they grew up. It’s the last thing I deserve.” This kind of piercing statement came amidst the ambient noise of the car’s mechanical operations, an unconscious complaint that seemed to float in the air around us.

What did she deserve? In her heart of hearts, Granny had already made a judgment about the value exchanged in the investment in and returns of love. They were an immigrant family and, regardless of the eras they experienced, their story belonged to Granny’s and her parents’ generations. In this empty house, her children and grandchildren were always absent, bespeaking a blank space I could neither see nor experience. Granny always spoke for her children during both good and bad times. It’s always hard to see the full picture of someone else’s family. However, this single statement was a thorn lodged in Granny’s side, revealing to me that there must have been an extraordinary psychological complex or other factor that led to the “inexplicable” inflection points and collective departure of her children. And all she could do was recognize this reality with a sigh, ever unable to relinquish herself from it.