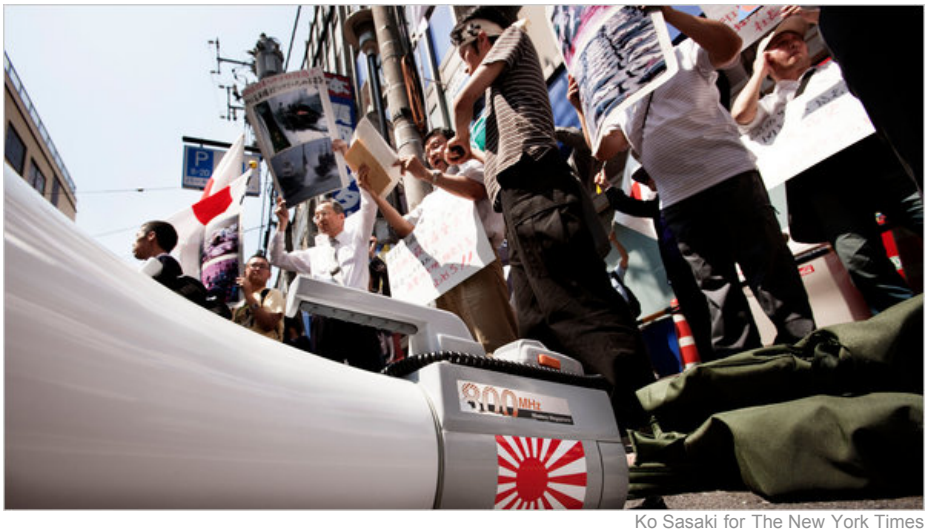
Japan's Far Right Blocks Screenings of 'The Cove'



Ko Sasaki for The New York Times

Members of a Japanese nationalist group in Yokohama recently demanded that a local theater not show the film "The Cove."

By HIROKO TABUCHI
Published: June 18, 2010

YOKOHAMA, Japan — "The Cove," an Oscar-winning documentary about dolphin hunting in Japan, would seem to be a natural fit for movie theaters here, but so far the distributor has yet to find a single one that will screen the film.

And if Shuhei Nishimura and his compatriots on Japan's nationalist fringe have their way, none ever will.

In a country that shudders at disharmony and remains wary of the far right's violent history, the activists' noisy rallies, online slanders, intimidating phone calls and veiled threats of violence are frightening theaters into canceling showings of "The Cove," which not only depicts dolphin hunting in an unflattering light but also warns of high levels of mercury in fish, a disturbing disclosure in this seafood-loving nation.

It is a stark example as well of how public debate on topics deemed delicate here can be easily muffled by a small minority, the most vocal of whom are the country's

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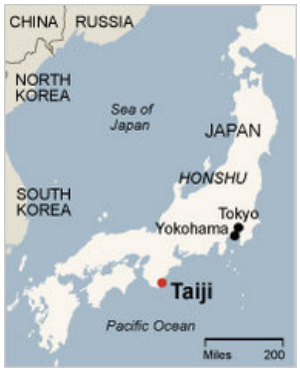

The New York Times

Many of the scenes in "The Cove" were filmed in Taiji.

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estimated 10,000 rightists who espouse hard-line stances in disputes against Tokyo's neighbors.

Other areas that have been effectively made taboo by the right wing include Japan's royal family, rights for ethnic minorities, Tokyo's occupation of parts of Asia in the last century, the nation's role in World War II and organized crime groups, many of which have close links with the far right.

Groups like Mr. Nishimura's Society for the Restoration of Sovereignty, which has just a handful of core members, have recently made it their mission to counter international criticism of practices like whaling and dolphin hunting. In countless rallies, the society's members have argued that the hunts are time-honored Japanese traditions that must be protected from Western condemnation, and "The Cove" is now their No. 1 target.

"If you have any pride in your nation, do not show this film," Mr. Nishimura bellowed through his loudspeakers at a protest in front of the Yokohama New Theater, with about 50 protesters with billboards and rising-sun flags in tow. "Will you poison Japan's soul?"

"The Cove" features scenes, many of them filmed surreptitiously, of dolphin hunts in the village of Taiji, southwest of Tokyo. A group of activists led by Ric O'Barry, who trained dolphins for the television series "Flipper," witness the violent hunts in a secluded lagoon, where fishermen corral dolphins, select a few to capture alive and use harpoons to stab the rest to death, turning the inlet crimson with their blood.

The killings, the activists charge, are driven by a lucrative trade in live dolphins for aquariums as well as a local market for dolphin meat, which is contaminated with mercury.

Commercial whaling has been outlawed worldwide since the mid-1980s, but the ban does not cover smaller marine mammals like dolphins. Japan kills about 13,000 dolphins a year, according to the Fisheries Agency, of which about 1,750 are captured in Taiji. Most of those killed in Taiji's hunts are bottlenose dolphins, which are not endangered. The movie has raised passions in the United States, too, though of a far different sort. After some covert work by the movie's producers — timed to coincide with the Oscar ceremonies — investigators raided a sushi restaurant in Santa Monica, Calif., in March and charged its owners with serving endangered Sei whale. After an apology, the restaurant soon closed its doors, apparently in an act of gustatory hara-kiri.

Advocates of free speech here have urged theaters to resist the threats and show the documentary, made by the American filmmaker Louie Psihoyos. Many Japanese are unaware that dolphin hunts take place here, where consumption of dolphin meat is rare, and critics say it is time for a public debate.

A few businesses are resisting the nationalists' pressure. The Internet service company Niwango plans a free streaming of the film on Friday, though for only 2,000 viewers.

But three theaters canceled runs of the film in early June after Mr. Nishimura's group warned on its Web site that it would stage demonstrations outside two theaters in central Tokyo. Twenty-three others are still mulling whether to show the film. Not one is currently screening it.

Yoshiyuki Hasegawa, the manager at Yokohama New Theater, said he was postponing screenings of the film. "Of course it upsets me," he said, "but I must consider the trouble it would bring to my neighbors."

Though the film was never slated for a blockbuster release in Japan, organizers now fear that there will be no run at all. "I had a sense of mission," said Takeshi Kato, president of the film's distributor in Japan, Unplugged. "I knew from the moment I watched it that this issue was something the Japanese needed to see and think deeply about."

Two years ago, nationalist protests prompted some theaters to cancel screenings of a documentary by a Chinese filmmaker on the Yasukuni shrine, a contentious war

memorial that honors Japan's war dead, including executed war criminals.

"Everybody is so scared," said Tatsuya Mori, an author and film director who has been a particularly outspoken critic of the right-wing protests and of the theaters for backing down so quickly. "The Japanese tend to imagine worst-case scenarios, but we need to remember that they are in fact a very small number of people."

Public fear of the far right stems from bouts of violence over the years that, while isolated, are deeply etched into the national psyche. There was the 1960 assassination of a socialist lawmaker, Inejiro Asanuma, by a sword-wielding right-wing sympathizer, for example, and the attack a year later on the president of Chuokoron, the publisher of a magazine that printed a satire about the royal family.

In 2006, a rightist burned down the house of a member of Parliament after he criticized Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's visits to the Yasukuni shrine. The same year, a right-wing group hurled a firebomb at the offices of The Nikkei, a leading daily newspaper, after it published reports on the emperor's views of the shrine.

The rightists' latest campaign has been one of the most dogged to date, though there is evidence that public interest in the film has risen with news media coverage of its difficulties in Japan. More than 700 people lined up to attend a one-time screening last week in central Tokyo organized by free-speech advocates. About 100 people were turned away for lack of space.

"I'm glad I saw it," said Tamaki Iijima, a 53-year-old homemaker from Saitama, west of Tokyo. "We live in a society that hides away the dirty things. To know is a big first step."

Makiko Inoue contributed reporting from Tokyo.

A version of this article appeared in print on June 19, 2010, on page A1 of the New York edition.

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