

## CAMPAIGN

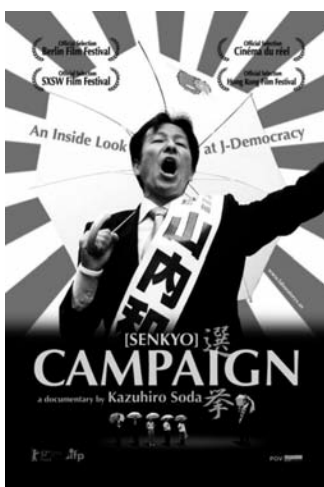
DIRECTED BY: KAZUHIRO SODA

NEW YORK: THE CINEMA GUILD

DVD, 52 MINUTES, 2007

ENGLISH SUBTITLES

Reviewed by Robert Angel



Award-winning Japanese videographer Kazuhiro Soda has given high school and university instructors a DVD-based, fifty-two minute classroom tool that we all can consider seriously. *Campaign* offers an entertaining and informative means of helping to explain the role of elections and political campaigning in Japan's democratic process.

Elections are one of the most important aspects of democratic government. Yet, all too often, we end up explaining the electoral process to our students with either

entertaining [hopefully!] anecdotal descriptions of specific campaign events, or, worse, with desiccated statistical analyses of election and opinion poll results. Both approaches leave students, who are still young enough to demand answers to fundamentally important questions, dissatisfied and bored.

*Campaign* follows the 2005 efforts of an inexperienced Japanese candidate, Kazuhiko Yamauchi, to win an open seat on the Kawasaki City Council. Video camera virtuoso Soda sets the overall tone of his documentary in the very first scene. We see Candidate Yamauchi setting up his own posters and sound equipment at a central Kawasaki train station. It's night. It's dark outside. Yamauchi is pitifully alone. In a just three minutes, Soda skillfully captures candidate Yamauchi's nervousness, self-consciousness, and inexperience.

Yet the candidate's sincerity and determination shine through those initial dark scenes, as he offers his message to the few passers-by who take notice and who reluctantly accept his proffered campaign brochures. Within those first three minutes, it is clear to all viewers that this film is neither a sensational "expose" of political wrongdoing nor a smarmy public relations piece.

Yamauchi's message? "I am Kazuhiko Yamauchi, a political reformer in the image of Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi. I promise to work hard for you! I am Kazuhiko Yamauchi!"—over, and over, and over(!), with emphasis on repetition of his own name, apparently in case passers-by fail to read it written in huge characters on the white sash he wears.



Film stills of the documentary from the official Web site at <http://www.laboratoryx.us/campaign/>.

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Pursuing this "practical politics" theme, next the camera follows Yamauchi back to his campaign headquarters. There he receives explicit instructions from an experienced campaign manager on how to shake hands and greet potential voters, including the importance of appearing to be sincere. The filmmaker makes it clear that the *appearance* of sincerity is more important for the campaign manager than sincerity itself.

*Campaign* addresses the sensitive issue of election campaign finances. Candidate Yamauchi telephones his thanks to a recent supporter and donor. Later in the film, we hear Yamauchi discussing the difficulty he faces financing his campaign since he is not yet a member of the City Assembly. This is a cynical assessment of this delicate issue but also certainly true.

The film also captures candidate Yamauchi's direct interaction with members of the community: from dry cleaners, to a real estate agent, to a shopkeeper complaining about the deplorable condition of the drains in front of her shop. As a "parachute" candidate—that is, a candidate selected by the national party from another part of Japan and "parachuted" into the district—Yamauchi has difficulty relating to the constituents he aspires to represent. Again, this is a fundamentally important aspect of the democratic process that all too often is lost in our classroom explanations.

Soda's film offers much more material on the democratic process in Japan that classroom instructors can easily generalize to democratic political processes everywhere, including family relationships, campaign staff jealousies, and relationships with friends. These are all part of the electoral process in any democratic system. The whole film—or sections of the film—are bound to stimulate instructive classroom discussion. Soda thankfully uses subtitles throughout, rather than English language dubbing. The subtitles are clear, easy to read, and accurately reflect the meaning and intention of the original Japanese. Viewers with Japanese language skills also have full benefit of the sound track.

In sum, Kazuhiro Soda's *Campaign* is a winner. This film is a classroom tool that instructors can use for years to come to inspire discussion and understanding of the democratic political process. ■

**ROBERT ANGEL** has been involved academically and professionally with Japan and US-Japan relations for more than four decades. He served as a faculty member in the Department of Political Science at the University of South Carolina, in Columbia, South Carolina, from 1986 to 2008, where he taught undergraduate and graduate courses on Japan's domestic politics and international relations.

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