

Responding to Disaster: Japan's 3.11 Catastrophe in Historical Perspective 災害への反応—3.11を歴史的に観る

Yau Shuk-ting, Kinnia

Responding to Disaster: Japan's 3.11 Catastrophe in Historical Perspective: Special Issue of The Asia-Pacific Journal edited by Yau Shuk-ting, Kinnia

Introduction

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In the Heisei Era (1989-) Japan has experienced numerous crises, ranging from political, financial, and social turmoil to natural disasters, inviting comparison with the turbulent early decades of Showa (1926-1989) history. In the face of calamity, however, the Japanese people have repeatedly surprised the world with their resilience and stoicism, and some would say, new forms of resistance to state and corporate power. In this special issue we reflect on the meaning of "natural disaster" and its interface with human action. When humans come into play, mishandling of a situation creates disasters. To what extent can it be said that the crises discussed here, some of the Major crises that Japan faced during the long twentieth century, can be attributed to human errors? How has knowledge of these crises affected the credibility of authorities both state and corporate in the wake of 3.11?

Although it is still too soon to draw conclusions about whether the recent catastrophes in northeastern Japan will push the nation in the direction of fundamental change, it surely

provides a good opportunity to re-examine the various crises that have haunted modern and contemporary Japan, and explore some of the approaches that the Japanese people have adopted in seeking to overcoming the aftershocks of 3.11. We therefore revisit a number of the major disasters in modern Japan in order to investigate responses to earlier crises, and how these crises shaped Japan's national psyche and individual and state consciousness. While earlier catastrophes have been examined by scholars in different areas of study, we relate them to current crises and reflect on how they might influence Japan in the wake of the events of 2011.

This issue is divided into three different sections.

Section 1 "**Nuclear irresponsibility**" features Matthew Penney's "Nuclear Nationalism and Fukushima". The article explains the ways in which Japan promoted nuclear power. It reveals that "technological nationalism," which bred confidence that Japanese technology was among the world's best and safest created blind spots that prevented identification of a possible nuclear crisis. Prior to the March 11 earthquake, warnings from the media, geologists, opposition parties and the International Atomic Energy Agency were brushed aside by the Japanese government and TEPCO. The LDP, with its close links to the nuclear power industry, repeatedly dismissed safety issues raised by critics. It was thus easy to assume that the Chernobyl crisis, a "man-made catastrophe," could not possibly occur in Japan.

Section 2 **“Disaster and Healing in Japanese Popular Culture”** looks at ways that disasters and economic decline have been represented in popular culture and considers the notion that popular culture can help Japan to overcome the traumas of 3.11.

Susan Napier’s “The Anime Director, the Fantasy Girl and the Very Real Tsunami” looks at Miyazaki Hayao’s animations with emphasis on his treatment of disasters. She notes that disasters or more precisely “world ending events” are popular subjects in Miyazaki’s films. Moreover, the stories often focus on young protagonists trying to stop various kinds of catastrophe from happening or worsening. Napier examines the disaster depicted in *Ponyo* (2009) and its relation to the tsunami triggered by the March 11 earthquake. The mermaid-like *Ponyo*’s attachment to a little boy causes a tsunami that nearly wipes out the entire fishing port. Napier suggests that Miyazaki, one of Japan’s most influential Japanese directors, uses his medium to suggest a path forward to a nation devastated by the March 11 earthquake.

Yau Shuk-ting, Kinnia’s “Therapy for Depression: Social Meaning of Japanese Melodrama in the Heisei Era” examines the use of melodrama by Japanese directors as therapy for “depression,” both economic and psychological, brought about by the burst of the bubble economy. The abrupt end of the postwar economic miracle in 1990 not only hurt the economy but also undermined economy-centered national pride. At around the same time, melodramas produced by Generation X directors began to appear. As Japan plunged into recession, these directors become nostalgic for the golden days. These melodramas set a Japanese love of life in the prosperous years against the death, and subsequent resurrection of a loved one. By analyzing three Japanese melodramas, namely *Love Letter* (1995, Iwai Shunji), *Be with You* (2004, Doi Nobuhiko) and *Crying out Love*, in the *Centre of the World* (2005, Yukisada Isao),

the author illustrates how the genre comforts the Japanese, through re-experience of a sweet past, at a time of economic and political decline. In face of the March 11 earthquake, these and other popular culture forms may also help to ease the trauma of a shocked nation.

Section 3 **“Past Disasters, Future Directions: Reflecting on WWII, Minamata, and Fukushima”** locates the 3.11 disasters against the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, mercury poisoning and the unending struggle for justice in Minamata, and the history of Japanese Buddhism and its role in dealing with disaster.

Through discussion of how Minamata disease was handled in Japan, Timothy George’s “Fukushima in Light of Minamata” points us toward important clues to how the catastrophe in Fukushima after the March 11 earthquake may be addressed while highlighting the tragedies of the Minamata experience. George shows that the “solutions” carried out over the years never halted the damage caused by mercury contamination, nor did the courts provide equitable solutions for victims. It becomes possible to read TEPCO’s actions in light of those of Chisso, the company responsible mercury poisoning Minamata.

Shi-lin Lo’s “Beyond Peace: Pluralizing Japan’s Nuclear History” studies the construction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki as symbols of peace in postwar Japan. She notes that commemoration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were largely suppressed under the Occupation and it was not until the hydrogen bomb test at Bikini Atoll, which irradiated the Japanese fishing boat *Lucky Dragon #5* that anti-nuclear movements emerged with full force. Hiroshima and Nagasaki then emerged as central symbols in Japanese and international efforts to promote world peace. Ironically, however, Hiroshima and Nagasaki (the only two atomic-bombed cities in human history) would be used to justify the country’s development of nuclear science

presented as a science in the service of “peaceful” use of nuclear power.

Brian Victoria’s “Buddhism and Disasters: From WWII to Fukushima” explores the relationship between Buddhism and the responses to disasters. Victoria links the presence of Buddhist monks on the front lines in the Asia-Pacific War to the willingness of soldiers and kamikaze pilots to accept death. In the wake of 3.11, the workers who remained at the Fukushima nuclear plants have also been called “kamikaze.” Victoria reminds us that some Buddhist doctrines have perhaps been deliberately misinterpreted. In particular the notion of gaman (endurance) and hoben (expedient means) have been exploited to justify “endurance” of disasters such as the nuclear disaster at Fukushima Daiichi, as well as tolerance for cover-ups regarding the magnitude of radiation contamination. He prompts us to rethink widely accepted doctrines taught under the name of Buddhism.

The essays bring together discussion of many of the most significant disasters in modern Japanese history, with authors offering insights and opinions from different perspectives on the disasters as well as state and societal responses to them in light of the recent 3/11 Earthquake.

Yau Shuk-ting, Kinnia is Associate Professor at the Department of Japanese Studies, The Chinese University of Hong Kong and the author of *Japanese and Hong Kong Film Industries: Understanding the Origins of East Asian Film Networks* (Routledge, 2010), *Chinese-Japanese-Korean Cinemas: History, Society and Culture* (The Hong Kong University Press, 2010), and the editor of *East Asian Cinema and Cultural Heritage: From China, Hong Kong, Taiwan to Japan and South Korea* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). Her latest book,

An Oral History of Japanese and Hong Kong Filmmakers: From Foes to Friends (The Hong Kong University Press, 2012) will be published soon. Email: kinniayau@cuhk.edu.hk

Recommended citation: Yau Shuk-ting, Kinnia, 'Responding to Disaster: Japan's 3.11 Catastrophe in Historical Perspective: Special Issue of The Asia-Pacific Journal,' The Asia-Pacific Journal, Vol 10, Issue 11, No 1, March 12, 2012

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Is a Special Issue of The Asia-Pacific Journal edited by Yau Shuk-ting, Kinnia

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See the complete list of APJ resources on the 3.11 earthquake, tsunami and nuclear power meltdown, and the state and societal responses to it [here](#).