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*****Note: Full text of article below**

EARTHQUAKE NATIONALISM AND NUCLEAR EMPIRE: “POWER” STRUGGLES IN THE LAND OF CATFISH

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Abstract

This essay introduces my ongoing research project that was inspired by Japan’s 2011 disasters. Japan has been going through its long-lasting recovery process from the Magnitude 9 earthquake and massive tsunami attack as well as a secondary accident of the nuclear meltdown. Now that these catastrophes have added another dimension to Japanese society, it is crucial to rethink Japan as an earthquake nation paying special attention to the effects of earthquakes on various aspects of Japan’s modern development. I reframe the contradictory existence of nuclear power plants on an earthquake nation as the friction between Japan’s “earthquake nationalism” and the “nuclear empire” formation.

Introduction

This essay introduces my ongoing research that was inspired by Japan’s recent catastrophes. Now that the 2011 disasters have added a new dimension to societal and cultural differences that deserves global attention, it is crucial to become aware of the effects of earthquakes on various aspects of Japanese culture. Throughout history, disaster prevention has always been the nation’s concern, and especially Japan’s modern development cannot be separated from its earthquake politics. In order to deepen our understanding of Japan’s current situation, we must first rethink Japan as an earthquake nation where people are bound together through “earthquake nationalism.” Secondly, we must interrogate the fact that Japan is an earthquake nation that relies on nuclear energy for its economic advancement. Postwar Japan’s nuclear development involves not only its international politics but also center-periphery power dynamics between Tokyo and the local host towns of nuclear power plants. The central idea of my research is to investigate the friction (or literally, the “power” struggle) between Japan’s earthquake nationalism and formation of a nuclear empire.

Earthquake Nation and Earthquake Culture

Throughout its history, Japan has experienced numerous large earthquakes. As the popular saying, *Jishin, Kaminari, Kaji, Oyamaji*¹ 地震、雷、火事、大山嵐 (earthquakes, thunders, fires, and typhoons), reminds us, earthquakes are one of nature’s most prominent threats to human lives. Before modern science revealed the mechanism of tectonic plates, a giant catfish living beneath the earth was blamed for killer quakes on earth. With or without knowledge of modern science, people on the Japanese archipelago have been conscious of their

co-existence with earthquakes for centuries. The imagery of a giant catfish living under the nation or the nation built on top of a catfish actually explains Japanese perception of earthquakes. Earthquakes are not a threat from outside but danger that comes from within. The various tales of catfish mirror pre-modern efforts to accept occasional mass-destruction. Modern science and seismology have proven that Japan as an “earthquake nation” and also contributed to formation of unique culture.

If we see modern Japanese history as a series of efforts rebuilding the nation from earthquake damages, we can also reframe Japan’s cultural formation itself as the development of an “earthquake culture.” To name a few examples, earthquake drills and *Bosai guzzu* 防災グッズ (disaster prevention/preparation goods) are the direct outcomes of the people’s acknowledgement of the unpredictable force with which they live. Consequently, dissemination of the idea of *Bosai* 防災 (disaster prevention/preparation/management) itself had large impact on Japan’s political and economical development as well as its international relations.

Earthquake Nationalism

After the 3.11 disasters, I often heard people say “I don’t understand why Japanese live in such a dangerous place” or “If I were them, I would have moved my family to a safe place long time ago.” To this I ask: where are the Japanese suppose to go? These insensitive remarks on Tohoku’s devastating situation reassured me that Japan as an earthquake nation is a rather unknown aspect to the Western eyes. People living in the earthquake nation have “earthquake nationalism” that hold them together in the “dangerous” place. It is no exaggeration to say that all Japanese have experiences of earthquakes and these shared experiences keep society from falling apart. Scientific knowledge from modern seismology certainly gives people warning; however, it has actually contributed to penetration of earthquake nationalism.

Earthquake nationalism is the reason the Japanese live with earthquakes. Unless the country disappears, they will continue to live there. In this regard, the 1973 novel of Komatsu Sakyo 小松左京, *Nihon Chinbotsu* 日本沈没 (Japan Sinks) challenges earthquake nationalism. The government attempts to evacuate people before the sinking of the country in the ocean. Some people decide not to leave their “home” and some also attempt to save the country from sinking. The majority of people wait in a long “evacuation” line only to face diaspora. Unlike the novel, Japan is saved in the 2006 film version. The ending of the film suggests that people come back and rebuild Japan as they have done many times. The film’s hopeful ending is the widely shared concept among Japan’s disaster films and it represents the other significant teaching of earthquake nationalism: People’s willingness to rebuild Japan.

During the process of its modernization, Japan experienced major magnitude 8 class earthquakes including the Nobi Earthquake (1984), the Meiji Sanriku Earthquake (1896), the Great Kanto Earthquake (1923), and the Showa Sanriku Earthquake (1933). The recovery process from each disaster provided people with an opportunity to engage with the idea of building an “earthquake proof” nation. In the 1970s the possibility (or prediction) of the Tokai Earthquake along with the popularity of the previously mentioned novel by Komatsu Sakyo enhanced people’s awareness of the disaster prevention culture. Unfortunately, the Great

Hanshin Awaji Earthquake in 1995 overturned our confidence in the modern earthquake proof living. Simultaneously, however, this experience has contributed to dissemination of the idea of *Saigai Borantia* 災害ボランティア (disaster volunteers) as positive engagement in disaster management.

In the article “The Power of Gaman,” T.R. Reid relates Japanese ways to deal with disasters with the concept of *gaman* 我慢 (endurance) and describes the Japanese way of dealing with disasters, stating that “the Japanese people tend to pick themselves up, dust themselves off, and start all over again with quiet determination, long-term planning, and a stoic commitment to hard work” (Reid 2011, 28). This is one example that represents Japanese mindset and deserves global attention as representation of earthquake nationalism. Also worthy of mentioning that, in film and literature, disasters often represent the beginning of a new chapter of our lives; I consider this phenomenon a reflection of earthquake nationalism.

Nuclear Empire

Japan has been going through its long-lasting recovery process from the Magnitude 9 earthquake and massive tsunami attack. In addition, these natural disasters were followed by the nuclear meltdown accident and as of April 2012, over 20,000 evacuees were forced to live outside their homes as nuclear exile. The Fukushima Daiichi nuclear meltdown is a secondary accident and it is a man-made disaster. These catastrophes reminded us of Japan’s dependency on nuclear energy. All of a sudden, the contradictory existence of nuclear power plants on an earthquake nation loomed up in the picture of Japan’s postwar prosperity.

Although modern Japanese culture is known for its admiration of the West (especially the United States) and its ability to “Japanize” Western imports, the nuclear power plants cannot be Japanized for the same reason that the Three Little Pigs’ brick house would not survive in Japan. Imagining 57 nuclear reactors built on top of a catfish, I consider postwar Japan’s nuclear power plant implementation as a non-Japanizable establishment that occurred in a particular cultural space between Japan’s indigenous earthquake culture and postwar Japan’s globalization. In short, “Fukushima” is standing on the fragile soil as an illegitimate child of the “postwar.” I view this contradiction as an outcome of Japan’s self-colonization through which the Western settlement is justified. As a result, the modern city, Tokyo, emerged as a “West” in Japan. Moreover, its advancement created center-periphery power dynamics in which poor local villages serve as the nuclear plant locations to supply more “power” to the center. This obvious exploitation is pointed out by a sociologist Hiroshi Kainuma as “Chuo ni yoru chihou no shokuminchika” 中央による地方の植民地化 (colonization of the peripheries by the center) (Kainuma 2011). However, Japan’s postwar transformation from a nuclear-bombed nation to a nuclear empire has largely concerns its international politics. I recognize the existence of power plants is a symbol of the U.S.-Japan power dynamics first, and the exploitation of peripheries is a secondary product of internal colonization by a postwar nuclear empire.

The Fukushima nuclear meltdown incident is an example of failure of manipulation and negotiation of earthquake nationalism, and its impact is observed clearly on the shift from *Han-genpatsu* 反原発 (anti-nuclear) movements to *Datsu-genpatsu* 脱原発 (overcoming nuclear

dependence) movements. Now it is finally the time for the empire to struggle to find alternative ways to supply “power.”

Teaching 3.11 and More

My research actually started as a course development project aiming to provide our students with opportunities to engage in intellectual conversations regarding current issues in Japan and my “Teaching 3.11 project” has thus far resulted in three new Japanese studies courses: a cultural studies course, a conversation topic course and a service learning course. In spring 2012, I taught the cultural studies course “Current Issues in Japan” as an experimental course with the course topic “Japan as an Earthquake Nation.” Although the course especially focuses on Higashinohon Daishinsai 東日本大震災 (the Great Tohoku Earthquake and Tsunami) and related nuclear issues, the course syllabus is designed to offer a diverse view of Japan’s relation to earthquakes in its modern development through examination of history of earthquakes, myths and legends, and the media and literary representations of disasters. In addition, since I think that it is important for students to share their understanding of Japan as an earthquake nation with our community, the course assignment involves developing ideas of community involvement (such as designing a lesson plan, organizing a fund-raiser, etc.)

Teaching this course was a fruitful learning experience through which I expanded my research interest. As I continue my research, I will widen my frame of analysis through examination of a broader range of materials including social media. Also, I am currently paying special attention to on-going debates on the Hamaoka nuclear power plant (located in Omaezaki-city, Shizuoka prefecture), for Hamaoka is located near the long predicted epicenter of the Tokai Earthquake. Earthquake-nuclear friction became a focal point of the recent mayor election of Omaezaki-city, and the election result reflects people’s “mixed feeling” towards the plant. In order to highlight my argument on the “power” struggle, I plan to study the civic movements concerning the Hamaoka Nuclear power plant further. I will also keep in close contact with Shizuoka University’s Bosai Center 防災センター (Disaster Management Center) as an information source.

My goal is to share the research outcome with a broader audience. The final product of my research will be a monograph and the development of a web-site. Concurrently, I am eager to offer the service learning course in which students will share their knowledge on Japan’s relation to earthquakes with communities (especially with school communities).

¹ Oyamaji (strong south wind/typhoon) became gradually confused with “Oyaji (fathers) and now the saying is recognized by many as “Jishin, Kaminari, kaji, Oyaji.”

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