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# Olympic Recoveries

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On March 24, 2020, Prime Minister Abe Shinzō, the Tokyo Olympic Organizing Committee, and the International Olympic Committee (IOC) agreed to postpone the 2020 Tokyo Olympics for one year.[1] From a global perspective, the delay is the most prominent consequence of the COVID-19 crisis in Japan thus far.

But the "Corona Calamity" (*korona ka*) is bigger—somehow, unbelievably—than the Olympics. The totality of the disaster is impossible to capture. This is not only because it is unfolding as I write. It is also because of the very thing that makes it a calamity: the myriad rhythms of crisis and recovery that intersect at COVID-19.

By "rhythms" of crisis and recovery, I mean the spatial scales, political-economic structures, and discourses that determine when and how an event becomes a crisis, when those affected imagine that they might recover from the crisis, and what recovery actually means. Those who speak of COVID-19 and the Olympic postponement in national terms seek to define their rhythm as *the* rhythm of crisis and recovery. A closer look reveals that the different rhythms that make up the Corona Calamity produce different understandings and experiences of the crisis, as well as the nature of the recovery that might follow.

In what follows, I share three rhythms of crisis and recovery: national history, the tourism industry, and the parcel delivery industry. Other rhythms are possible—of legacies of discrimination and the phenomenon of "corona harassment" (*korona hara*); of elder care, demographic decline, and alienation; of citizens who persevere in protesting the abuse of power even under a state of

emergency. But the rhythms of national history, tourism, and the parcel delivery industry intersect squarely at the Olympics. In that sense, they provide a frame for exploring the crisis that is both distinct and open-ended—one node of a vast rhizome of crisis temporalities, rhythms, and events.

## The Recovery Olympics

Since the beginning of the Japanese government's bid for the 2020 Summer Olympics, Prime Minister Abe Shinzō matched his pitch to the rhythm of national history. "We in Japan are true believers in the Olympic movement," he told the delegates of the IOC in Buenos Aires in 2013:

> I myself am just one example. When I entered college in 1973, I began practicing archery. Can you guess why? The year before, in Munich, archery returned as an Olympic event after a long time. My love of the Olympics was already well established. . . . When I close my eyes, vivid scenes from that opening ceremony in Tokyo in 1964 come back to me. Several thousand doves all set free at once. High up in the big blue sky five jet planes making the Olympic rings. All amazing to me, only 10 years old.[2]

Japan has hosted two other Olympic Games since 1964. In 1972, the country hosted the Winter Games in Sapporo. In 1998, the Winter Games came to Nagano. But Abe put the downbeat to the story of 2020 on 1964. And with good reason. The 1964 Games were not only Japan's sole previous experience hosting the more prestigious Summer Olympics. Billed as Japan's return to international society, the 1964 Games also showcased the triumph of Japan's economic and political recovery from the disaster of war.[3]

Abe and the Tokyo Olympic Organizing Committee argued that the 2020 Summer Olympics in Tokyo would mirror the historical arc of 1964. Faced with a slow-burning recession, labor shortages, demographic decline, and challenges from across the political spectrum (including his own party), Abe portrayed the 2020 Summer Olympics as a measure of Japan's triumph over the 2011 Triple Disaster and as proof that his economic policies of fiscal expansion, monetary easing, and structural reform—"Abenomics"— would lead the country to a sustainable social and economic future. Indeed, the Organizing Committee referred to the 2020 Olympics as the "Recovery Olympics" (*Fukkō Gorin*). The Tokyo Olympics represented the climax of nine years of reconstruction in Miyagi, Iwate, and Fukushima Prefectures—the three northeastern prefectures most affected by the 2011 earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear reactor meltdown. It would allay concerns about the safety and stability of Tokyo as a place for business and leisure. Indeed, Abe's first statement to the IOC in 2013 was "Tokyo—one of the safest cities in

the world, now and in 2020. Some may have concerns about Fukushima. Let me assure you, the situation is under control. It has never done, and will never do, any damage to Tokyo."[4]

The Olympic Committee invoked 1964 to nurture the plausibility of a "Recovery Games"—of an Olympics that could bring about the end of a disaster and restore Japan to a place of prestige in the international arena. Some links to the story of 1964 were bluntly material. Five facilities built for 1964 would be reused: Yoyogi National Gymnasium, Nippon Budokan, Equestrian Park, Tokyo Metropolitan Gymnasium, and Enoshima Yacht Harbor. Other links infused the official narrative of the 2020 Games. In the promotional campaign that accompanied the final year of preparation, the Tokyo 2020 Games website proclaimed, "The Tokyo 1964 Games completely transformed Japan and, with less than 300 days until Tokyo 2020, the country is set for another historic and transformative Games."[5]

The Tokyo Organizing Committee most explicitly articulated the idea that the rhythm of 2011–2020 mirrored that of 1945–1964 in its design of the torch relay. The 2020 relay would start in Naraha, a seaside town of roughly 7,000 residents that was entirely encompassed by the twenty-kilometer evacuation and exclusion zone following the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant meltdown. "Just as the [1964] Tokyo Olympic flame transmitted the message of postwar recovery last time, we'd like to fulfill the duty of conveying the message of recovery from stricken areas to the world," said Satō Masayuki, chief of the Nippon Kōki Saigo plant in Fukushima Prefecture, which made the torches for 1964 and would make them again for 2020.[6]

More direct connections between 1964 and 2020 were programmed into the relay itself. Tomihisa Shōji, a 102-year-old survivor of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, would run the torch through Hiroshima Prefecture. Tomihisa was born in Miyoshi City, the same city in which the final torchbearer of the 1964 Olympics, Sakai Yoshinori, was born on August 6, 1945. Concluding the first day of the torch relay in Fukushima's Minamisoma City would be forty-six-year old Ueno Takayuki, who lost his eight-year-old daughter Erika, his three-year-old son Kōtarō, and his parents in the March 11, 2011, tsunami.[7]

Like the prime minister, the Organizing Committee chose its Japanese Olympic chronology carefully, avoiding facts that could not be synchronized with the rhythm of disaster and recovery. The rhythm of the "Recovery Olympics" was a pattern of sudden, agentless disasters and epic national recoveries: an atomic bomb that falls from the sky; a tsunami that crashes ashore; a town emptied by a nuclear meltdown. Recovery serves as the narrative companion to "hope," which political leaders have increasingly promoted as the authorized emotional response to disaster in postwar Japan.[8] Notably absent from the recovery rhythm are

other, less ameliorating emotions—anger, sadness, rage—and other, more critical explanations of cause and effect—structural violence, historical misdeeds—that certainly coexist with the hope for a more glorious future.

In one very concrete example, the official media of the Tokyo 2020 Games did not feature the 1940 Tokyo Summer Olympics in its chronology of the Tokyo Games. In fact, the 1940 Tokyo Olympics never took place—it moved to Helsinki (and was subsequently canceled) because of threats of a boycott against Japan for its invasion of China. But the erasure of 1940 from the story of 2020 is a product of the current moment, which emphasizes recovery by obscuring the historical question of why there was a need to recover in the first place. By contrast, the organizers of the 1964 Olympics repeatedly invoked 1940—for them, 1964 was a chance to recover from the loss of the 1940 Games.[9] Indeed, contributing to the rebranding of the Olympics as a beacon of hope for an increasingly broken world was central to Abe's pitch to the IOC. "Choose Tokyo today," Abe declared in 2013, "and you choose a nation that is a passionate, proud, and strong believer in the Olympic movement."[10] The subtext, not likely lost on IOC members, was that the protests against corruption, economic inequality, and colonialism that arose around the torch relays for the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the 2012 London Olympics, and the 2016 Rio de Janeiro Olympics were unlikely to take place in Japan.

On March 24, 2020, Abe declared that the 2020 Tokyo Olympics would be delayed until the summer of 2021. Faced with increasing pressure from international athletes and concern from public health officials, the IOC and the Tokyo 2020 Organizing Committee issued a joint statement to announce the delay. The statement took pains not to disrupt the rhythm of national history. The delay was not the result of a failure on the part of the Japanese government. It was a prudent response to a global catastrophe. "[G]reat progress has been made in Japan to fight against COVID-19," the statement read. But "the unprecedented and unpredictable spread of the outbreak has seen the situation in the rest of the world deteriorating."[11] The IOC and the Tokyo 2020 Organizing Committee folded the postponement into the rhythm of recovery. The Olympic flame will stay lit in Japan. The postponed 2020 Games will be a "Recovery Games" on a new scale. It will be the "light at the end of the tunnel in which the world finds itself at present."[12]

## "Corona Shock"

But significant damage has already been done, not just to the rest of the world but to Japan as well. Inviting comparisons with the "Lehman shock" of 2008, the media refers to the economic aspect of the Corona Calamity as the "Corona shock" (*korona shokku*). The tourism industry has been particularly devasted. Despite headlines such as "Japan Tourism Industry Sees Stormy Year Ahead as Tokyo Olympics Delayed," COVID-19 pushed some tourism operators into distress weeks before

the delay was announced.[13] The virus was viewed as a "direct attack" on the tourism industry. In early March, for example, Shizuoka Prefecture reported that nearly half a million guests had canceled hotel reservations in the prefecture between January and the end of February.[14] In addition to border closures, which effectively shut down the international tourism industry, the national government's stay-at-home order extended through Golden Week, a week-long collection of national holidays in late April and early May and typically the busiest week of the year for domestic travel. Many business hotel operators around the country reported 90 percent declines in sales for March, April, and May.

The international tourism industry was the canary in the COVID-19 coal mine. The numbers of foreign tourists visiting Japan has skyrocketed in the past eight years. In 2012, the monthly average of inbound tourists to Japan was 697,000. In 2018, it was 2.6 million.[15] In 2019, nearly thirty-two million people visited Japan from other countries. For 2020, the Abe government had a target of forty million visitors.[16]

The tourism boom is the product not of Olympic hype but of the union of Abe's general policy of "fiscal easing" with a specific policy of "visa easing" to promote travel from China and Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries to Japan. Since around 2000, and especially after 2011, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has worked with China, Indonesia, India, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Vietnam, and the Philippines to simplify the visa process and expand the options for tourists traveling from these countries to Japan.[17] The reforms included a special category of multiple-entry visa for foreigners who intended to visit Iwate, Miyagi, or Fukushima Prefectures, the three prefectures most affected by the Triple Disaster.[18] When Abe took office, he further deregulated the industry, putting into place more relaxed building codes to promote hotel construction, opening up more landing spots at Japan's international airports, and expanding the list of items that could be purchased duty-free.[19] The resulting boom in tourist spending was one of the few success stories of Abenomics.

The overall effect of the Corona Calamity on the tourism industry is far larger than the effect of the 2011 Triple Disaster. One month after the Triple Disaster, in April 2011, visits by overseas residents were down 62.5 percent compared with April of the previous year.[20] In contrast, provisional figures show that visits by overseas residents to Japan in April 2020 were 93 percent fewer than in April 2019. Moreover, the drop in absolute numbers is staggering: visitor arrivals between January and April crashed from 10,980,480 in 2019 to only 3,942,800 in 2020.[21] The scale of the disaster is directly related to the policy of visa easing. Visits from Chinese, Korean, and Taiwanese travelers now make up roughly two-thirds of Japan's foreign arrivals. In February 2020, nearly two months before the

postponement of the Olympics, visits from Asian travelers collapsed. Visits from Chinese travelers were down 88 percent from the previous February. Visits from Korea were down 80 percent and from Taiwan, 45 percent.[22] Hope is in short supply. Instead, as Matsushima Kyoko, a hotel operator in Shizuoka Prefecture, told the *Asahi* newspaper, there is "an anger I can't vent."[23]

Unlike the Olympic recovery, which takes the form of a singular, triumphant event, tourism's recovery depends on a return to consistency—not just for local operators or the nation, but for the world. For many in the industry, the unnerving thing about this disaster is its incommensurability. There are no projections for when recovery will happen, or what recovery will even look like. "It's an unprecedented national crisis," said Dōko Hiroyuki, owner of the Dōko dried fish store, which sits outside of the famous Tsukiji Fish Market in Tokyo. "With the Eastern Japan Triple Disaster, there was a lot of energy behind the feeling of 'Let's recover!' But this one looks like it's going to be long term, and accordingly the damage will be big."[24] Others in eastern Japan likewise compare the Corona shock to the Triple Disaster and find the differences between the two events to be uniquely unsettling. Said the owner of one business hotel in Sendai, the capital of Miyagi Prefecture and one of the areas hit hard by the economic fallout from the 2011 disaster, "With the Triple Disaster, there was also the recovery demand, so we looked forward to that. But these conditions aren't comparable."[25] In western Japan, hotel and tourism operators compared the Corona shock to local disasters, such as the 2016 Kumamoto earthquake or the eruption of Mount Unzen in 1991. The sense that this recovery has no predictable rhythm, however, is shared. In Mabi, a city in Okayama Prefecture that was wiped out by a mudslide in July 2018, Hirai Hiroyuki, the owner of Hinomaru Taxi, compared the two experiences: "After the torrential rains, there was the sensation of recovering day after day. But this time I can't see the end."[26]

## Asynchronicity

There is a sense in which envisioning recovery as a return to normal—to the "Before Times," as we have taken to calling it in my family—is the privilege of those whose lives and livelihoods the political-economic structure served. For those industries that were riven with unsustainable rhythms to begin with, however, recovery suggests revolution rather than return.

Japan's parcel delivery industry is in an ongoing crisis of labor and public relations. In 2016, the crisis spilled over into the public spotlight. That year, two parcel delivery drivers filed a lawsuit against Yamato Transport for unpaid overtime. The resulting judgment ordered the company to pay twenty-four billion yen in unpaid overtime to 59,000 employees. The amount of back pay owed was unprecedented—orders of magnitude more than any other judgment that year or

previously.[27] As evidence mounted that unpaid overtime was a company strategy for containing costs rather than the unfortunate product of a few bad managers, discussion of parcel delivery working conditions made it onto the floor of the Diet.[28] More than the lawsuit or the question and answer session in the Diet, however, what fixed the industry's crisis image in the popular imagination was a video of a Sagawa Express worker that went viral in December 2016. The one-minute, thirty-second cellphone video shows the driver throwing and kicking boxes that he was unable to deliver up an apartment foyer staircase, only to have them fall back down on him or blow away in the wind. His rage fills the screen.[29]

As with tourism, the background to the crisis is a dramatic increase in volume over the past decade. In 2015, parcel delivery services in Japan delivered over 3.7 billion packages to consumers—five hundred million more packages than were delivered to homes in 2010 and nearly one billion more than in 2006.[30] For the fiscal year that ended in March 2019, this number rose to 4.3 billion.[31] Amazon has played a large part in this increase. As Yokota Masuo noted in his undercover reporting on the parcel delivery industry, Yamato Transport drivers "were busy before Amazon. But after Yamato began to accept Amazon packages in 2013, they were made to work without taking a lunch break."[32] Amazon is only part of the crisis. Parcel delivery companies have chosen to pass the costs of package delivery on to delivery workers rather than consumers. For example, in its pursuit of market share, Yamato Transport negotiated a contract with Amazon which guaranteed that Yamato would lose money on deliveries outside of Tokyo. Even inside of Tokyo, the company would only break even. The company's delivery drivers bore the burden of this strategy in the form of long hours and unpaid overtime.[33]

The parcel delivery industry and the Abe government are embracing a notion of recovery that coincides with a wider embrace of what Matsuoka Masahiro and Yamate Taketo call "de-synchronized services," or commercial transactions in which neither the buyer nor the seller see each other's faces or interact in person.[34] Indeed, the Abe government highlights parcel delivery as a key component, and test case, for its plans to reengineer the Japanese economy to thrive in a state of precipitous demographic decline.[35] A key element of Abenomics is increasing worker productivity. By increasing worker productivity, Abe hopes to spark a "virtuous cycle" of economic growth that will obviate the need for increased labor immigration: higher productivity will lead to increased profits, which will lead to increased wages and light inflation, which will lead to increased consumer spending, which will foster further increases in profits, higher wages, and light inflation, which will encourage more consumer spending, and so on.[36]

De-synchronizing is the heart of the parcel delivery industry's plan to increase worker productivity. To date, the most prominent reform measure is an effort to de-synchronize driver and customer: the installation of parcel delivery boxes on

porches and in apartment building lobbies, which reduce redeliveries by allowing drivers to deliver packages regardless of the location of the customer.[37] The Olympics further tied de-synchronizing to the success of the nation as a whole. As part of its effort to reduce the number of vehicles moving through Tokyo during events, the Organizing Committee targeted home parcel delivery and other transport operations, which rely almost exclusively on trucks for distribution. After a year of requests for traffic mitigation plans with few concrete results, in October 2019, the Organizing Committee succeeded in getting the government to officially request changes to delivery company practices: reduce redeliveries, establish more pickup boxes in apartment lobbies and train stations, and reduce the overall number of deliveries for the duration of the Olympics.[38] These requests mirrored what the industry had already been promoting for several years. But this time, parcel delivery companies and the government fashioned installing parcel delivery boxes into a material contribution to the success of the Tokyo Games and a source of national pride. Now the Corona Calamity has transformed de-synchronizing society from a neoliberal economic reform into public health common sense. The number of parcels shipped and delivered in Japan is higher than ever. Japan's Internet giant Rakuten reported a 58 percent increase in total sales at Rakuten Market (*Rakuten ichiba*) and Net Super (*Netto sūpa*) in April compared with April of last year.[39] According to anecdotal reports, parcel delivery drivers are delivering 50 percent more packages than they were before.[40] In response, however, Yamato Transport and other companies have pursued the same set of reforms, geared toward consumer practices rather than sustainable labor. Yamato Transport has pressured consumers to install parcel delivery boxes by further reducing the hours that it will redeliver packages and the hours that it will even receive requests for redelivery.[41] Some companies have lifted the requirement for signatures at deliveries, offering contactless "place and deliver" service (*okihai*). Yamato, Amazon, and other delivery companies are establishing even more parcel delivery boxes near convenience stores and train stations and in apartment buildings.[42] Panasonic reported that March 2020 sales of its "Combo-Light" parcel delivery box, which debuted in October 2019, were more than double the average of the previous four months.[43]

But a recovery revolution predicated on making contactless delivery and limited redelivery palatable by establishing parcel delivery boxes—a revolution that encourages consumers and businesses to expect *more* rather than less flexibility in parcel delivery—is manifestly not a recovery revolution for parcel delivery workers. The push for ever more delivery options and ever faster, ever cheaper delivery rates is its own rhythm of crisis. It authorizes the parcel delivery companies to celebrate parcel delivery workers' asynchronicity—with their bodies, with their families, and with a society that defines itself by the values and needs of consumers—as the solution to Japan's economic future instead of forcing the companies, and the

nation, to acknowledge the human costs of consumer-driven culture.

Indeed, the Corona Calamity underscores the inadequacy of a rhythm of recovery predicated on the well-being of our consumer selves at the expense of our laboring selves. There is no telework for parcel delivery.[44] In the United States, workers at Amazon, Instacart, and FedEx struck on May 1 to protest their working conditions during the pandemic. In Japan, parcel delivery workers want to quit. The issue is not simply one of pay. Many parcel delivery workers are subcontractors who are paid by the parcel. The increase in volume has increased their pay accordingly. But they are working late into the night with no breaks or vacation.

Yukita Kōsuke highlights the unsustainability of this rhythm in his parcel delivery-themed web comic and blog, *Yukita no yon koma takuhaibin* ("Yukita's Four-Panel Express Home Delivery Parcel"). On May 5, just after Abe extended the country's emergency declaration for three more weeks, Yukita posted a comic called "The Thing I Want Now" (Ima hoshi mono). "Now is the do-or-die moment! Let's keep at it!" says the manager of a parcel delivery office. "It's impossible!" the sweating, exhausted delivery worker tells the manager. "More than wages," he says, "I really just want a break." In his commentary, Yukita acknowledges the hopelessness that he encounters among parcel delivery workers: "It is very painful to not be able to see what lies ahead. I hope that you can persevere. I am rooting for you."[45]

## Conclusion

Hope is in short supply when recovery is conceived of as an event. The Abe government and previous Japanese administrations have chosen hope because hope is theoretically more unifying than other emotions. But this begs the question of unifying for whom, and unifying around what.[46] If, during the Corona Calamity, we can step away from the rhythm of recovery as event, we can enter into rhythms of anger, frustration, and grief. These emotions have unified Japanese labor and citizen protest movements in the past.[47] They continue to do so in the present.[48] Even in the context of the Olympics, recovery as event held weak appeal to those most impacted by Japan's disasters. Ueno Takayuki, who lost most of his family in the 2011 tsunami and had planned to carry the Olympic torch on the first day of the relay, told the *Asahi* newspaper that he felt a little resistant to the idea of "recovery" (*fukkō*). Nevertheless, he wanted to show his deceased family, "We're in good health."[49]

Good health will require recoveries in multiple rhythms. Some return us to the life of before; others reorient us to life in the new present. I hope, amid our daily struggles, we can establish one or two, or three or four, that lead to a revolutionary future.

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## Notes

[1] International Olympic Committee (IOC), "Joint Statement from the International Olympic Committee and the Tokyo 2020 Organising Committee," March 24, 2020, https://www.olympic.org/news/joint-statement-from-the-international-olympic-committee-and-the-tokyo-2020-organising-committee (accessed July 1, 2020).

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[6] *Japan Times*, April 22, 2017.

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[8] David Leheny, *Empire of Hope: The Sentimental Politics of Japanese Decline* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018).

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[10] Abe, "Abe Shinzōsōri daijin no purezenteeshon IOC sōkai."

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[23] *Asahi shinbun*, March 11, 2020.

[24] *Asahi shinbun*, April 11, 2020.

[25] *Asahi shinbun*, April 9, 2020.

[26] *Asahi shinbun*, April 24, 2020.

[27] Yokota Masuo, *Jingi naki takuhai: Yamato vs. Sagawa vs. Nihon yūbin vs. Amazon* [Inhumane parcel delivery] (Tokyo: Shōgakukan, 2018), 315.

[28] Yokota, *Jingi naki takuhai*, 324.

[29] The video is available on YouTube: "Sagawa kyūbin? ga buchi gire?" [Sagawa Express? Is livid?], posted December 24, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SIXNyz6rGyU (accessed July 1, 2020).

[30] *Asahi shinbun*, August 24, 2016.

[31] *Japan Times*, October 2, 2019.

[32] Yokota, *Jingi naki takuhai*, 322.

[33] Nihon keizai shinbunsha, ed., Takuhai kuraishisu [Parcel delivery crisis] (Tokyo: Nihon Keizai shinbun shuppansha, 2017), 68–69; Yokota, *Jingi naki takuhai*, 320–22.

[34] Matsuoka Masahiro and Yamate Taketo, *Takuhai ga naku naru hi: Dōjisei kaishō no shakairon* [The day that home parcel delivery disappears: The social theory of eliminating synchronicity] (Tokyo: Nihon keizei shinbun shuppansha, 2017), 4.

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[37] Yamato Transport also instituted a "work style reform" (*hatarakikata kaikaku*). These reforms included a limit on the overall number of packages Yamato Transport would accept, protected lunch breaks, closer supervision of overtime, and other exploratory measures. But these reforms did not apply to the entire industry or to Yamato's network of subcontractors. Nihon keizai shinbunsha, *Takuhai kuraishisu*, 73.

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[41] *Asahi shinbun*, April 22, 2020.

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[44] *Yukita no yon koma takuhaibin*, March 29, 2020.

[45] *Yukita no yon koma takuhaibin*, May 5, 2020.

[46] Leheny, *Empire of Hope*, 183.

[47] Wesley Sasaki-Uemura, *Organizing the Spontaneous: Citizen Protest in Postwar Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001).

[48] *Asahi shinbun*, May 13, 2020.

[49] *Asahi shinbun*, December 18, 2019.