

The Great Kantō Earthquake of 1923 and the Japanese Nation

Responding to an Urban Calamity of an Unprecedented Nature

By J. Charles Schencking



Desolation of Nihonbashi and Kanda districts of Tokyo as seen from the Roof of Dai-ichi Sogo Building, Kyobashi. Image source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Kanto_earthquake.

In the autumn of 1923, educator Miura Tōsaku toured the remains of a thoroughly destroyed city: Tokyo. Walking through the once vibrant, now blackened and broken remains of Japan's capital, Miura concluded in no uncertain terms that the recent disaster that struck Japan was a moment of apocalyptic revelation. "Disasters," he wrote, "take away the falsehood and ostentation of human life and conspicuously expose the strengths and weaknesses of human society."¹ The disaster in question was the Great Kantō Earthquake, the anniversary of which today—September 1—all Japanese know as Natural Disaster Prevention Day. In less than one week, the 7.9 magnitude earthquake and subsequent fires annihilated most of Tokyo and virtually all of Yokohama. Moreover, the earthquake caused nearly 6.5 billion yen of damage, a remarkable figure roughly four times larger than Japan's national budget for 1922. The earthquake disaster was also a human calamity, resulting in the deaths of more than 110,000 individuals and leaving nearly 1.5 million homeless. The destruction, dislocation, and devastation caused by the quake, in the words of *Tenrikyō* relief worker Haruno Ki'ichi, not only defied description, it simply "surpassed imagination."²

Since Miura's 1923 reflection that disasters expose both strengths and weaknesses in individuals and society, many scholars and educators, social commentators, and journalists have likewise suggested that disasters are indeed revealers, "an ideal lens with which to view society," or "the closest thing a student of society ever approaches to a natural laboratory."³ Writing more than half a century ago, historian Marc Bloch, suggested that "Just as the progress of a disease shows a doctor the secret life of a body," so too "the progress of a great calamity yields valuable information about the nature of a society."⁴ More than this, however, disasters are also ideal vehicles by which educators can introduce students to a society, culture, nation, or geographic region. Furthermore, by exploring the ways in which nations, governments, and even the international community have responded to and attempted to use disasters for various political and ideological ends, teachers and students alike can gain significant insight into a wide array of social, political, environmental, religious, and economic relationships within a society exposed by a disaster and the reconstruction processes that follow.

This article examines how the people of Japan responded to the Great Kantō Earthquake of 1923, the worst natural disaster to strike this island nation in recorded history. The earthquake, I suggest, fostered a culture of catastrophe defined by political and ideological opportunism, contestation, and resilience, as well as a culture of reconstruction in which elites sought to not only rebuild Tokyo, but also reconstruct the Japanese nation and its people. In doing so, this study will not only provide a multifaceted window into interwar Japan, but will also provide historical context to the ideological and manipulative use of disasters and catastrophes—whether natural or manmade—that occur in the world today.

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As any visitor to Japan knows, this nation is no stranger to devastating earthquakes. The 2004 Niigata and the 1995 Kobe catastrophes are only the most recent examples of Japan's vulnerability to seismic risk. Lying at the intersection of three tectonic plates—The Pacific Plate, the Eurasian Plate, and the Philippines Sea Plate—roughly eleven percent of the world's seismic energy is released annually under the Japanese archipelago. Moreover, twenty percent of the world's earthquakes of 6.0 magnitude and over each year occur in Japan. Devastating earthquakes rocked the Tokyo region many times prior to 1923. In 1703 and 1855 Edō, as Tokyo was formerly called, experienced extensive destruction from earthquakes and fires as a result of the Philippine Sea plate subducting directly beneath Tokyo Bay.⁵ Japan is, as many commentators have suggested, an "earthquake nation."⁶

The earthquake that Tokyo experienced at two minutes to noon on September 1, 1923, however, resulted in unprecedented disaster-related death and destruction for Japan. The 7.9 magnitude earthquake, centered just over forty miles south-southwest of Japan's capital, released energy equivalent to the detonation of nearly 400 Hiroshima-size atomic bombs. The initial jolt, lasting just over fourteen seconds, collapsed most of the brick and un-reinforced concrete buildings throughout the Kantō region. Fire, however, proved most devastating both to humans and the actual built environment of Tokyo. One hundred and thirty separate fires began in Tokyo less than an hour after the quake, with many clustered in the densely populated eastern and northeastern wards of Asakusa, Nihonbashi, Kanda, Kyōbashi, Fukagawa, and Ginza. Fueled by high winds and increased temperatures, leaking gas mains, and an abundance of combustible material, five large whirlwind firestorms erupted and consumed large parts of Asakusa, Higashi-Ueno, and Honjo, the latter burning and suffocating

nearly 40,000 citizens who had taken refuge at the infamous Honjo Clothing Depot.⁷ Survivors from the Honjo Clothing Depot virtually all referred to this locale as Hell, a site inhabited not by humans, but a place teeming with "Hungry Ghosts," "red inflamed bodies," "black swollen bodies," "bodies partially buried," "endless rows of charred bodies," and "bodies piled higher than one could imagine."⁸ Tawara Magoichi, future Minister of Commerce and Industry (1929–1931) confessed that what he saw with his own eyes "was more devastating than what I had heard in the rumors. The busy streets of the once prosperous city had been burned to the ground in a second."⁹ By September 5, more than 33,000 square meters of Tokyo existed as nothing more than blackened remains and ash.

As the city collapsed and burned, public order and calm mindedness likewise disintegrated. Amidst widespread panic, chaos, and death, rumors spread throughout the disaster stricken areas. Often relayed by refugees, some stories suggested that Mt. Fuji had erupted or was about to, while others claimed that a large *tsunami* had washed away Yokohama. Many other rumors dealt with Japan's largest ethnic minority group, Koreans. Starting in Yokohama, rumors circulated suggesting that bands of lawless Koreans had set fires, looted shelters, shops, and vacant homes, and poisoned wells throughout the Kantō region. Violence ensued. Estimates suggest that vigilantes and voluntary self-defense groups killed around 6,000 Koreans, as well as a small number of Japanese and Chinese mistaken for Koreans, in the days following the disaster.¹⁰ While news of the massacres was initially tightly controlled, within months select newspapers and journals published stinging critiques of the murderous events. Tawara Magoichi called the crimes "deplorable," suggesting that the disaster exposed "a major defect in the national spirit" of Japan.¹¹

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Earthquake refugees gathered with their belongings in front of the Imperial Palace on September 2, 1923. Tokyoshi ed., *Tokyo Shinsairoku* [Record of the Tokyo Earthquake], 5 volumes (Tokyo: Tokyoshi, 1926), 5:14.

Order returned to Tokyo after 50,000 Imperial Japanese Army troops fanned out across the city to implement stabilization, recovery, and relief operations. Once in place, soldiers established relief camps, temporary medical facilities, constructed seventy-four temporary bridges, cleared 130 miles of roads for the transportation and distribution of food and water from neighboring prefectures, and collected and burned the corpses of the dead. Moreover, army personnel likewise took the lead in constructing relief camps which, by October, housed more than 105,000 refugees. Facilities built by private corporations and the municipal government together housed just under 20,000 total.¹² By the early autumn of 1923, Tokyo had become a city of barracks, temporary shelters, and makeshift communities, though it remained to virtually everyone an urban space still defined by destruction.

In the weeks after the calamity, direct relief and recovery initiatives gave way to two other important phenomena that invariably accompany major natural disasters: interpretation and opportunism. Natural disasters are often used by elites for political, ideological, or economic purposes, and Japan in 1923 was no exception.¹³ Many Japanese elites, including bureaucrats and politicians, religious leaders,

social commentators, and journalists, publicly described the earthquake as divine punishment for clear political and ideological purposes relevant to the time. They sought to strengthen the legitimacy of their previously expressed concerns about, and displeasure with, what they saw in 1920s urban Japan, namely decadence, selfishness, extravagance, frivolity, individualism, and the pursuit of luxury. In essence, these critiques were based on concerns about the perceived state of urban modernity in Japan; a Japan that many elites felt had lost its *Meiji-era* values of sacrifice, loyalty, selflessness, frugality, and obedience. While such concerns were not entirely new, the earthquake significantly increased the cacophony of alarmist voices in Japan, amplified their resonance in elite circles, and gave perceived cosmological “legitimacy” to previously voiced concerns about the moral degradation of Japanese society.

One individual who used the earthquake opportunistically to dramatize what he saw as the moral fragility of 1920s Japan was philosopher Fukasaku Yasubumi. Not surprisingly, Fukasaku had long championed the idea that Japan of the post WWI era was in a state of moral decline. Writing in journals, both popular and academic, as well as in books and in newspapers, Fukasaku freely admitted that the

Gotō and the constellation of urban planners, social welfare advocates, and engineers he surrounded himself with sought to reconstruct Tokyo as the city of the future.

Gotō Shinpei. Image source: *Portraits of Modern Japanese Historical Figures*, <http://www.ndl.go.jp/portrait/e/index.html>.



earthquake presented a unique opportunity by which people could interpret what was “nature’s inevitability as moral inevitability” and use it for social, political, and ideological ends.¹⁴ “When we look back upon the state of the popular mind of our society before the earthquake,” he wrote, “we can understand that interpreting the disaster as a deliberate divine plan (*kami no keikaku*—神の計画) was not absurd at all.” He concluded:¹⁵

Everyone must remember that many of us ran to flippancy; lacked steadiness; lapsed into luxury; and forgot diligence and frugality. Particularly, the tendency of sexual slackness was deplorable: there were so many scandalous events, and, some part of the society obviously acknowledged it affirmatively. People fervently sang the praises of materialism; ideals lacked luster; selfishness became dominant; and the gallant spirit of devotion was swept away. At such a time, God cracked down a great hammer for the sake of our race, waking us up from idleness, urging us to reflect upon our past deeds.

Heaven (*ten*—天), he suggested, had illustrated its displeasure with society, and the people were to blame. The disaster was, in effect, an act of divine punishment (*tenken*—天譴). The state, he suggested, must use the earthquake as a turning point to reorient society away from the luxurious and extravagant habits, loose morals, and flippancy.

Other individuals were even more explicit. *Tenrikyō* Priest Okutani Fumitomo suggested that Tokyo, as the center of many western-inspired, foreign ideologies and behaviors, was singled out by God’s (*kamisama*—神様) fury. He suggested, moreover, that the urban districts that housed Tokyo’s pleasure quarters and commercial enterprises—areas which he concluded were covered with the dust called sin in which extravagance, merrymaking, vanity, luxury, and desire dominated—received the brunt of God’s wrath.¹⁶ Rather than curse God, however, Okutani suggested that God had done Japan a favor: he pointed out the weaknesses in, if not failings of, Japanese society and provided a unique opportunity to pull together and “rebuild the capital as well as reconstruct the popular mind.”¹⁷ To Okutani and others, such as social welfare activist and Christian socialist Abe Isō and economist Fukuda Tokuzō, the earthquake was, if interpreted and used correctly, a blessing, a golden, once-in-a-generation opportunity.

One individual who exemplified the spirit of post-disaster opportunism was Gotō Shinpei, a former mayor of Tokyo who had gained urban planning and administrative experience in Japan’s colonies of Taiwan and along the South Manchurian Railway. On September 2,

1923, he assumed the position of Home Minister and soon thereafter became President of the Reconstruction Institute. Gotō and the constellation of urban planners, social welfare advocates, and engineers he surrounded himself with sought to reconstruct Tokyo as the city of the future. Adopting state-of-the-art planning techniques, architectural concepts, and building materials, Gotō and his colleagues sought to create a new, modern, imperial capital that emphasized state power and authority. Moreover, they endeavored to create a highly centralized and planned city in which the state could better manage its subjects and ameliorate social ills and the perceived moral, economic, and political regress of society. This, they believed, could be secured through the adoption of proactive urban planning and the expansion of extensive social welfare facilities. At the heart of these plans were a series of wide roads and public transportation networks, which many planners believed would serve as the “arteries” of the capital. Beyond transportation, however, the new Tokyo would include extensive new public housing projects, modern hospitals, preventive care clinics, schools, day care facilities, sporting grounds and parks, mobile libraries, lecture halls, public cafeterias, and neighborhood community centers. In short, the new Tokyo would be the model high modernist city that could serve as a blueprint for all future urban renewal projects in Japan. In the words of social welfare advocate and bureaucrat Nagai Tōru, the “new Tokyo” would “respond to the needs of the new era materially and spiritually” and thus allow the state “to renovate society.”¹⁸ By October 1923, it became clear that the vast magnitude of destruction caused by the September 1 earthquake and fires was matched by an equally expansive sense of opportunity.

Transforming perception into reality required two key ingredients, namely political authority and money. Both proved far more difficult to secure than anticipated. Discussions related to reconstruction costs immediately fostered the second great phenomenon associated with post-disaster reconstruction: contestation. Rather than unite the political establishment, the earthquake and reconstruction process widened many of the underlying political and ideological fissures that scarred the landscape of interwar Japan. Gotō’s initial plan to purchase all of the burnt out areas of Tokyo at a cost of just over 4 billion yen was rejected out of hand by his fellow cabinet ministers as too grandiose, let alone too expensive. Even smaller scale reconstruction plans that ranged from 1.3 billion to 3 billion yen were met with labels of “reckless,” “dangerous,” or “problematic” by financial and political officials—including the Minister of Finance, Inoue Junnosuke.¹⁹ An adherent to the classical liberal economic view that times of depression or recession warranted a retrenchment of government expenditures, Inoue refused to raise new taxes for Tokyo’s

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reconstruction and, in 1924, only after considerable pressure, agreed to release public bonds to finance reconstruction.²⁰ Moreover, Inoue required that all other ministries of state prune their proposed budgets for 1924 and 1925 to cover part of the anticipated costs for reconstructing Tokyo. Ministers of state who guarded their administrative budgets and responsibilities with fierce determination were thus pitted against a wide-ranging reconstruction program for fear that this would reduce the future budgetary health of the bureaucracies under their jurisdiction.

Unfortunately for Gotō and many other starry-eyed planners in the Reconstruction Institute, resistance to wide-ranging reconstruction plans came from numerous other directions apart from just fiscally conservative financial officials. Parliamentarians from rural districts who comprised the majority of Japan's legislative representatives feared that a radical reconstruction of Tokyo would markedly reduce the amount of funds available for previously agreed upon and all future rural public works and infrastructure projects. As a result, many expressed reservations, if not clear antipathy, to plans both in public and on the floor of Japan's elected assembly, the Diet. More than this, however, many rural MPs contested Gotō's vision of a modern, metropolitan Japan revolving around the imperial capital; numerous parliamentarians argued that the countryside, not Tokyo, was the true heart of Japan, or as a number declared, "the foundation of the nation." More than a few astute parliamentarians used the post-disaster reconstruction debates opportunistically to highlight what they saw as the plight of rural Japan. If one were to pour money to earthquake sufferers, why not also direct some to impoverished rural communities as well, asked MP Miwa Ichitarō. He further suggested:²¹

Sufferers of the earthquake look terrible and we feel sorry for them for sure, [but we act] as if we are shocked to see the blood of the injured. They will soon recover. I regret, however, to see that the government ignores the issues of rural areas which may jeopardize the foundation of the nation.

Rural MPs opposed to a radical makeover of Tokyo were joined by many counterparts who represented urban electorates in Japan. These representatives likewise opposed virtually all plans to condemn, readjust, and rezone large areas of burnt-out Tokyo without adequate compensation, not only in order to uphold the interests of private land owners who they represented, but also because many MPs believed that such state intervention was well beyond the purview of proper state authority in a parliamentary democracy. The 1889 Meiji Constitution, as many politicians pointed out, guaranteed the right to private property.

The reconstruction effort that many planners and opportunistic politicians believed would unite the nation and serve as a blueprint for national reconstruction proved to be a political, ideological, and legal morass. As social anthropologists who study disasters have recently suggested, while disasters create a perception of opportunity or a clean slate on which to "start over," disasters also "set a critical stage, bringing out and igniting arenas of contestation within society."²² In Japan, politicians and parliamentarians whittled away the national

reconstruction budget from a grandiose and unrealistic 4 billion yen to a paltry 649 million yen in December 1923. Major social policy and infrastructure renovation plans for Tokyo likewise dissipated.²³ Indeed, projects that fell under the heading social welfare totaled 4,525,000 yen, or an equivalent of 0.69 percent of the overall reconstruction budget.²⁴ Moreover, of the 31,166,264 square meters of residential land earmarked for land readjustment, only 2,938,050 square meters of land (9.4 percent) were readjusted for non-residential purposes, most contributing to widened roads, the creation of sidewalks, and establishment of small neighborhood parks.²⁵ While land readjustment regularized the size of many residential land plots, Tokyo's reconstruction was modeled heavily on the existing plans of pre-earthquake Tokyo. As Vice President of the Reconstruction Institute, Miyao Shunji, later lamented, plans for a great, new, awe-inspiring Tokyo were ignored or bypassed out of financial necessity. In Miyao's mind, old Tokyo had been recreated.²⁶

While dreams of constructing a modern, new metropolis may have been shattered by the contentious political and financial disputes, numerous government officials and social commentators thereafter directed their attention toward reconstructing Japan's subjects and citizens. Believing that spiritual reinvigoration of the people was as important as the physical reconstruction of Tokyo, many state agencies launched public morals and suasion campaigns geared towards making Japanese more frugal, earnest, loyal, and obedient. Using the post-earthquake reconstruction period opportunistically, politicians implemented a series of anti-luxury tariffs on goods politicians deemed extravagant or wasteful. In July 1924, Japan's parliament placed sizeable tariffs on a wide range of items, including pearls (2,000 percent increase), furs (200 percent), tooth powder, toiletries, and perfumes (200 percent), items made from coral (250 percent), tortoise shell (200 percent), artificial spices and essences (500 percent), and embroidered fabrics (250 percent).²⁷ Moreover, many social commentators sought to encourage all Japanese to reflect upon and integrate the experiences of the earthquake into their daily lives. Educator Takashima Heizaburō encouraged families to foster a sense of diligence and thrift at home and to eat only brown rice on the first of each month to commemorate the earthquake disaster. Once integrated into family life, he hoped that this would encourage people to abandon extravagant meals altogether.²⁸ A long-time proponent of temperance, Abe Isō urged all Japanese to end the extravagance of alcohol and to abstain from drinking for one, two, or even three years as a result of the earthquake.²⁹ Japan's Prime Minister Katō Takaaki himself used the one year anniversary of the earthquake in a clear political fashion to launch his government's thrift and diligence campaign that he believed was a fundamental priority of the post-earthquake nation. Claiming that while he had implemented disciplinary measures for all civil servants "making them models of frugality to the general public," and "passed laws concerning import tariffs on luxurious items," the "evil habits of extravagance and self-indulgence still existed," overwhelming the "beautiful customs of hard-working frugality."³⁰ He therefore urged all Japanese to "pull together,

be alert, and stand up with determination [in order] to improve the destiny of the nation.”³¹ Katō, and other politicians after him, eventually realized that such campaigns were, in essence, pitted in an uphill battle against the conveniences and attractions of modern, urban, consumer-oriented society.

Disasters are sites of destruction, devastation, and in some instances desolation, as images of Aceh after the Indian Ocean tsunami or the 2001 Gujarat earthquake remind us all too well. Post disaster landscapes are, however, also sites of opportunity—perceived or real—for those wishing to reconstruct or reshape a society. As moments when societies are at their most vulnerable, disasters give opportunists the illusion that a clean slate exists or that a brave new world or unprecedented beginning awaits a city, people, a nation, if only the opportunity is harnessed and used correctly. Reconstruction processes as well as disasters can change landscapes. But do they fundamentally change underlying patterns of behavior or overturn society as much as the physical destruction they often cause? Over the long term, resistance, resilience, and calls for a return to normalcy often define reconstruction. Attempts to reorder or reconstruct a society rarely go unchallenged, even—or especially—after major disasters, when seemingly so much is at stake and the eyes of the world fall upon a nation. Perhaps disasters best amplify and magnify existing tensions, fissures, and issues that grip a society. If so, they reveal more than they change. In revealing, disasters give students and scholars wonderful insights into human nature, cultural and social constructions, and illuminate the many relationships—between man, nature, state, and even the cosmos—that define our existence. ■

NOTES

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