



The Fukushima Anniversary: Japanese Press Reactions

福島一周年--日

本の報道機関の対応

Mar. 11, 2012

Matthew Penney

March 13 marks the one year anniversary of the devastating earthquake and tsunami that devastated much of the coast of northern Japan and left over 15,000 dead. Over 3000 are still missing. Memorial ceremonies have been [held](#) all over the country.

The tremendous loss of life and slow but steady reconstruction across Tohoku must not be downplayed, but it is the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear accident, spread of radiation, and continued risks that represent the most significant ongoing dilemma. Many members of the Japanese public agree with this assessment and there have been several large [demonstrations](#) to mark the 3.11 anniversary. Over 16,000 came together in Fukushima Prefecture amid calls for the elimination of nuclear power. Another 30,000 demonstrated in one part of Tokyo and 10,000 in another. Over 7000 marched in Osaka. 2000 gathered in Hiroshima asking for "No More Hiroshimas, No More Fukushimas, No More Hibakusha". Writing "hibakusha" in the katakana script brings victims of the nuclear bombs and victims of irradiation together ("hibaku" is written with different Chinese characters in these different cases). Many other smaller demonstrations took place throughout Japan and internationally. At the Fukushima Daiichi plant, the president of TEPCO and other company officials apologized to the people of the prefecture and the nation, using fairly well-worn terms.

While TEPCO apologizes, there are many who see a lack of contrition from the company and the entire nuclear establishment. TEPCO Vice President Aizawa Zengo restated the company's position that the tsunami was "outside the realm of imagination". There is plenty of [evidence](#), however, that the company was warned about the possibility of tsunami damage on multiple occasions. Recent stories have also played up the company's reluctance to talk about the disaster. For example, a March 11 [Asahi scoop](#) reveals that a manual for phone operators handling compensation issues for TEPCO instructs them to avoid using words like "radiation" and "nuclear".

This essay will examine how the Japanese press is dealing with the issue of nuclear responsibility on the 3.11 anniversary to assess how lessons are being interpreted and what facets of the disaster are being highlighted.

Asahi's March 11 [editorial](#) focuses on Fukushima as a lifespace and reminds us "The nuclear accident did not only spread radiation, it has also driven people apart." It focuses on flight from the prefecture and the breakup of families and communities, emphasizing that while the health impact of long-term exposure to low levels of radiation may be the subject of debate, the fear and sense of rupture brought about by the nuclear accident is not. The editorial also expresses doubts about government claims that some of the most seriously affected areas will be purged of radiation that accumulated in the soil and on surfaces within two years. 80% of locals believe that the goal is unrealistic, showing once again that the Japanese government's inability to make clear, contextualized information available has only sowed unease.

The *Asahi* offers other perspectives, emphasizing the anti-nuclear power line that it has taken since the middle of last year. A [commentary](#) by Senior Staff Writer Hoshi Hiroshi quotes Japan Buddhist Federation President Kono Taitso, who brings together war memory and reflection on nuclear power:

"What did Buddhist groups do during World War II?" Kono asked. "Instead of raising voices in opposition to the war, they gave fighter planes to the military through donations gathered from church members. Despite that, there was no attempt to confess their sins for a considerable time after the war. I thought for a long time whether that was proper."

He added, "There is overlap between the religious leaders who accommodated the state during that war and cooperated with the war effort and the atmosphere of not saying anything about the nuclear power plant issue. When we think about the people who have been forced to leave their hometowns due to the nuclear accident, as people in religion who preach about the dignity of life, nuclear power plants are something we cannot accept. We should review our lifestyles and seek out a society in which nuclear power plants are not necessary."

The article also presents a critical quote from Kitazawa Koichi, chairman of the Independent Investigation Commission on the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Accident, who has been highly critical of Japan's "nuclear village" of politicians, businessmen, and specialists who forged a myth of safety:

Kitazawa said, "A self-defeating trap was created by the myth of the total safety of nuclear power plants. That is a logic that says there is no need for further safety measures since the plants are already 100 percent safe. According to high-ranking government officials, individual officials held doubts about the safety measures, but they all felt nothing would change even if they said anything, so they collectively read the mood of the situation. If the ability to read the mood of any situation is unavoidable in Japanese society, then such a society does not have the qualifications to safely operate a high-risk, large-scale and complicated technology such as nuclear energy."

Scholar Oguma Eiji, famous for important works that critically examine themes such as the postwar origins of the idea of Japanese ethnic homogeneity and 1960s student protests, calls in a separate [piece](#) for Japanese citizens to rethink socio-political agency. He sees sluggish politics as clearly lagging behind a transformation in the civic consciousness of the public:

... a good aspect [of the disaster] is that people who had left everything up to others have begun to take action after making their own judgments. Some expressions of that change are the heightening of the anti-nuclear energy movement and the support provided by nonprofit organizations to the disaster areas.

Those trends represent moves to learn the necessary knowledge for themselves in order to act. That is because things can no longer be left up to the government or specialists.

While some people say the number of volunteers is smaller than for the Great Hanshin Earthquake of 1995 that devastated Kobe and vicinity, in some sense there has been greater maturity this time around, especially in terms of proposing alternative measures and management of organizations. If a "new Japan" is to emerge, it will likely be from such moves.

Conversely, the nuclear power plants have become a symbol of the "old Japan."

That was a system in which the public did not have to think of anything because peace of mind and safety was provided if everything was left up to the government and specialists. There was no competition and subsidies were distributed to local governments.

People now clearly understand that the system was dysfunctional as well as the level of devastation that it could produce.

The political sector has not been able to keep up with such changes.

Even more than *Asahi*, *Mainichi* has been the major anti-nuclear voice among Japan's daily newspapers. In a March 7 [editorial](#), the newspaper declared that it is "Time to say goodbye to nuclear power".

The editors warn:

Economic concerns ... have begun to wear down the fear of nuclear disaster. And so, as we consider our nuclear power and energy policy's future, we must remember what the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear plant meltdowns have done to Japan, the pain of the people who have lost their hometowns, and the radioactive contamination that will blight the landscape for decades to come.

They are most concerned that while "change" has entered into political rhetoric, there is no clear plan about what will be done with the country's nuclear plants and how Japan's energy future will be handled:

First of all, the government has indeed begun to hammer out plans to reduce the country's dependence on nuclear power, and there are no whisperings that this will be overturned. On the other hand, we have yet to see an overall vision or process on how the government will evaluate the risks associated with nuclear power and advance policy to decouple our economy from it.

As in Oguma's *Asahi* piece, pessimism resulting from lack of government decisiveness and clarity is paired with hope for civil society. *Mainichi* [highlights](#), for example, what NPOs have been doing for Fukushima children:

Fukushima Kids, for example, offers sleepaway camps for children from Fukushima Prefecture, where the nuclear crisis has yet to be brought under control. The children are invited to stay in Hokkaido and other areas of Japan -- where they are free to play outside without fear of radiation exposure -- during their school holidays. Last summer and this past winter, 518 and 190 children, respectively, participated in the program, away from home and their parents. Preparations are underway for another round during the upcoming spring break. Various NPOs, private companies and local governments have cooperated to make this program possible, and the amount of donations has reached approximately 80 million yen.

The editors outline a vision for a "NPO revolution":

The Japanese government's general account budget is approximately 90 trillion yen. Suppose 10 trillion yen in donations are made in a year, with NPOs taking charge of increasingly more in the public sector without being bogged down by the sectionalism of the bureaucracy, while overcoming community and generational boundaries. Imagine that. The government will slim down considerably, inevitably bringing changes to the Diet.

Let us call this the "NPO revolution." Of course, continued recovery from the triple disasters requires further support from the public. With politics at a standstill, each and every one of us must take action and do what we can. Over the past few years, the idea that others' happiness leads to one's own happiness has been gathering momentum among our youth. This is certainly a foundation on which a revolution can be built.

We will never forget the day that filled the entire country with untold sadness and shattered our values -- including our belief in the "safety" of nuclear power. From here on out, let us imagine a future in which Japan leads the world in realizing a new "public" society.

Over the last year, the *Yomiuri* has presented a largely affirmative take on nuclear power and has foregrounded economic and energy supply concerns. The editors [argue](#), for example, that "If nuclear reactors operating longer than 40 years are forced to be shut down one after another, it may pose a serious threat to the nation's power supply."

The newspaper calls for tighter nuclear regulation, however, as well as green energy initiatives, which are seen as complementing a nuclear future. There are also [calls](#) for the "unimaginable" to be eliminated from nuclear safety discussions, with contingency plans put in place for all possible scenarios. Details, however, are lacking.

The rightwing *Sankei* newspaper has overwhelmingly prioritized an "international competitiveness" line of argument since 3.11 and asserts in its March 11 [editorial](#) that "Japan must not lose sight of the global standard". That "global standard" is, of course, the use of nuclear power as an energy staple. The *Sankei* editors claim that the "Myth of Safety" has now been replaced by a "Myth of Danger" and effectively brand resistance to nuclear power as a mere emotional reaction to tragedy. They argue "It was because of nuclear energy that Japan was able to become an economic power... Without nuclear power Japan's energy self-sufficiency rate is 4% and we will become an impoverished country." For this reason, they call for Japan to invest heavily in nuclear power going forward, both as a foundation of domestic energy policy and as an export industry.

Most of Japan's major news sources have taken the March 11 anniversary as an opportunity to present large-scale, often top-down, commentary on nuclear power and Japan's future. Communist Party newspaper *Akahata* has several such pieces, including [calls](#) for a decisive move away from nuclear power. It also contains smaller-scale stories that highlight the continuing struggles of Fukushima residents and refugees. JCP diet member Takahashi Chizuko, for example, brings [attention](#) to Fukushima mothers and children who have left the prefecture. Those who left from areas outside of the official evacuation zone struggle to get support services such as daycare and registration for flu shots.

Tokyo Shimbun editors are looking toward the future and not liking what they see. This newspaper has been among the strongest critics of both the "nuclear village" and government responses to 3.11. In a March 11 piece they [argue](#) that the Noda government will most likely restart currently mothballed nuclear reactions in the summer months and that despite continuing Kan's talk of alternatives and de-nuclearization, that nuclear power will be an important part of Japan's energy landscape for decades. The *Tokyo Shimbun* editors call on politicians to find the right feed-in tariff balance to promote alternative energy strategies.

Son Masayoshi, President of Softbank, Twitter guru and green energy proponent, who emerged as a leading critic of the Japanese government after 3.11, said on Twitter that he expects alternative energy sources to move Asia and the world from a century of war into a century of peace.

Shukan Asahi, the *Asahi* organization's weekly news magazine has taken a strong anti-nuclear stance. This [week](#) it plays up government irresponsibility in a feature that highlights "hidden" reports of contamination from Hokkaido to Shizuoka. It also has a dialogue between anti-nuclear crusaders Arnie Gundersen and Hirose Takashi.

Magazines on the right like *Shukan Shincho* go considerably further than the rightist newspapers in shifting debates from pro or anti-nuclear to international competitiveness and even tension and rivalry, playing to neo-nationalist sentiments. The March 15th [issue](#) (which went on sale on the 8th) calls Japan a "Paradise for Spies!" warning that measures must be taken to prevent agents from China and North Korea from stealing the identities of disaster victims. The issue also raises an uncomfortable theme for progressives – authors call for discussions of negative health effects of radiation to be downplayed because they may feed into discrimination against people from Fukushima. Also in the issue is another pro-nuclear position that deserves to be aired – will more people sicken and die from coal-burning and fossil fuel consumption than from nuclear accidents like Fukushima Daiichi? *Shukan Shincho* simultaneously discusses serious issues related to de-nuclearization, but with the admixture of confrontational nationalist views.

In contrast, conservative magazine mainstay *Bungei Shunju* [presents](#) some of the deepest investigative reporting of TEPCO's failings in its issue released in March. Yanagita Kunio writes on the tsunami warnings that went overlooked. Funabashi Yoichi accuses the government of hiding worst-case scenarios from the public. There are criticisms of both officially released radiation figures and of the government's reconstruction plans. Looking just at daily newspapers and TV broadcasts misses much of the deep and critical work being done in Japan's magazine industry which has lost sales ground since its 1980s height but still plays a vital role in the public sphere.

Of Japan's major magazines, *Shukan Diamond* has been the most consistently critical of the country's nuclear industry and presented some of the sharpest critiques post 3.11. The magazine now is presenting a series of articles probing the "lessons" of both the earthquake/tsunami and the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear crisis in its latest issue to mark the anniversary. One [article](#) draws attention to the Ministry of the Environment's "ranking" of contamination in different parts of Japan. Areas very close to Tokyo are included in the second of three ranks which designates an area where intensive measurements are necessary. The article emphasizes that some radiation health experts assert that there are no negative health effects up to 100 mSv yearly exposure. Others, however, argue that exposure of over 1 mSv may have effects. In essence, the authors argue that we simply "do not know" what the health effects of low levels of medium to long-term radiation exposure are. There are parts of Chiba prefecture, directly adjacent to the capital, where yearly radiation exposure is calculated at 1 mSv or more. Local administrations there are asking the central government for support, or at least guidance, but little has been forthcoming. *Diamond* places this in the context of widespread unease about radiation effects and the often stilted government response. Another *Diamond* [article](#) takes aim at the "Safety Myth" which authors argue continues to drive public debates on nuclear power.

Shukan Kinyobi has been another frequent critic of nuclear power. The cover of their 3.11 [anniversary issue](#) shows the ruins of Fukushima Daiichi and asks "After this, do we really want [the reactors] running again?" Warning that the government is planning on restarting reactors and aggressively pushing exports despite the fact that the detailed causes of the Fukushima Daiichi accident are not known, the editors demand a renewed anti-nuclear pledge. The issue has articles on misinformation at TEPCO, the arrogance of other energy companies in failing to discuss risks, energy alternatives, and civil society movements against nuclear power.

In the end, there is a strong economic pragmatist argument from the *Yomiuri* and *Sankei* that seems to have the quiet support of the current Noda administration which is promising elimination of nuclear power in the long term without defining exactly what that means. The *Asahi* and *Mainichi*, along with myriad other news sources including powerful center-right bastions like *Bungei Shunju* are putting forward a variety of critical reports, questioning the assumptions of the nuclear industry, and giving the public a reason to think deeply about future alternatives.

Matthew Penney is an Assistant Professor in the Department of History, Concordia University, Montreal. He is an Asia-Pacific Journal coordinator.

Click [here](#) for *The Asia-Pacific Journal's* complete 3.11 coverage.

Also see our special issues on Fukushima and Japanese nuclear power:

Kinnia Yau's **Responding to Disaster: Japan's 3.11 Catastrophe in Historical Perspective**

- Yau Shuk-ting, Kinnia, [Introduction](#)
- Matthew Penney, [Nuclear Nationalism and Fukushima](#)
- Susan Napier, [The Anime Director, the Fantasy Girl and the Very Real Tsunami](#)
- Yau Shuk Ting, Kinnia, [Therapy for Depression: Social Meaning of Japanese Melodrama in the Heisei Era](#)
- Timothy S. George, [Fukushima in Light of Minamata](#)
- Shi-lin Loh, [Beyond Peace: Pluralizing Japan's Nuclear History](#)
- Brian Victoria, [Buddhism and Disasters: From World War II to Fukushima](#)

Christopher S. Thompson's **The Great East Japan Earthquake One Year On: Reports from the Field**

1. Christopher S. Thompson, [The Great East Japan Earthquake One Year on: Reports From The Field](#)
2. William W. Kelly, [Tohoku's Futures: Predicting Outcomes or Imagining Possibilities](#)
3. Alyne Elizabeth Delaney, [A Report From One Miyagi Fishing Community](#)
4. Dawn Grimes-MacLellan, [Students in the Field at the Site of the Great East Japan Earthquake](#)
5. Christopher S. Thompson, [Local Perspectives On the Tsunami Disaster: Untold Stories From the Sanriku Coast](#)