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EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

READINGS FROM ASIA

From Post-postwar to Postdisaster: Two Views of Japanese Society Since the 2000s

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Hamano Satoshi (濱野智史). *Akitekucha no seitaikei: jōhō kankyō wa ikani sekkei saretekitaka* アーキテクチャの生態系 =情報環境はいかに設計されてきたか [The Ecology of Architecture: How the Information Environment Has Been Designed]. Tokyo: NTT Shuppan (NTT 出版), 2008.

Kainuma Hiroshi (開沼博). “*Fukushima*” ron: *genshiryokumura wa naze umareta no ka* 「フクシマ」論：原子カムラはなぜ生まれたのか [Understanding Fukushima: What is the Origin of Japan’s Nuclear Power Village?]. Tokyo: Seido-sha (青土社), 2011.

Japan’s “postwar system,” which followed its defeat in World War II, was characterized by a high level of economic development. The collapse of the bubble economy in the early 1990s heralded the decline of Japan’s postwar system, a process that was accelerated by the Great East Japan Earthquake of March 2011 and the subsequent release of radiation during the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster. If Japan’s defeat in World War II marked the first rupture in contemporary Japanese history and the beginning of the postwar period, the earthquake and nuclear disaster mark a second rupture, dividing the postwar period from the postdisaster period. These devastating events have deeply damaged faith in the myth of security upon which postwar Japanese society depended, and understanding them will be critical to understanding Japanese society in the future. The two books I discuss here explore two vital aspects of the rapid changes that Japan has experienced in the third millennium. The first book discusses the Internet; the second discusses nuclear power plants as they are formed through the interaction between the capital and other regions of Japan.

In *The Ecology of Architecture: How the Information Environment Has Been Designed*, Hamano Satoshi examines the changes that have occurred as a result of the Japanese-language Internet's absorption of Web 2.0 products developed in the United States and propagated throughout the world, such as Google, Twitter, and Facebook. Although studies of the Internet have largely been pursued as a subset of media studies, Hamano borrows the concept of "architecture" from Lawrence Lessig's *Code and Other Laws of Cyberspace* (1999). That is, Hamano sees "the services and tools of the Internet as a form of architecture" and is "especially concerned to explore the design of the 'structure' [of the Internet]" (14). He takes a positive view of the fact that this architecture subconsciously controls Internet users, as it is this aspect of the Internet that not only controls people regardless of their own will but also enables them to employ the Internet to redesign society. A diversity of architectures coexists within the Internet, and when any architecture becomes sufficiently widespread, it becomes the basis for further architectural developments—a chain of events that Hamano describes as an "ecosystem." Using these analytic categories, Hamano reveals how Google and other Web 2.0 products have transformed the Internet environment. He then describes the various new social media and architectures of the Japanese Internet, including Mixi (*mikushī* ミクシイ), Winny (ウイニー、)¹, Nico Nico Douga (*niko niko dōga* ニコニコ動画), Vocaloid (*bōkaroido* ボーカロイド), 2channel (*ni channeru* 2ちゃんねる), and mobile phone novels.

Hamano points out the limitations of previous studies of the Internet that take a marketing studies or "practical" approach to new Internet platforms and have thus been concerned primarily with the number of users that different platforms attract. He also argues for the importance of escaping a narrow West-centric perspective when observing what he calls the "natural development" of Japan's Internet architecture (including 2channel, Mixi, and Nico Nico Douga). He reminds us that the Internet as it actually exists is different from the idealized image of the Internet in the West. Moreover, just as Japanese society is not an unchanging monolith, so the Japanese Internet has the potential to be transformed through better architecture. In this way, society determines technology and technology determines society in a continual process of mutual transformation (334).

With Hamano's work in mind, let us now consider Kainuma Hiroshi's *Understanding Fukushima: What is the Origin of Japan's Nuclear Power Village?* Since the Great East Japan

Earthquake of March 11, 2011, Fukushima Prefecture has become fixed in the minds of people around the world as the site of a nuclear disaster comparable to Chernobyl. Kainuma, whose hometown is Fukushima, based this book on his PhD dissertation, which he finished just before the earthquake struck. He begins the book by noting that, before the earthquake, nuclear energy was considered much too simple a research theme. This was a problem, he argues, for “no subject lends itself as well to the discussion of ‘modern society’ and ‘modernization’ as nuclear energy, nor does any system reflect more closely the mechanism of modernity” (13). This understanding of the relationship of modern society and nuclear power underlies a series of questions that Kainuma poses. Why did the Tokyo Electric Power Company (東京電力株式会社) build the nuclear power plant in the Tohōku region in which Fukushima is located and not in the capital region around Tokyo, where it is responsible for maintaining electricity? Why did the people of Fukushima put complete trust in the nuclear power plant despite knowing the dangers associated with nuclear energy generation? Why did people outside the capital region, who had struggled for decades against nuclear energy, suddenly change course and start emphasizing the urgent need to attract more nuclear power plants? Kainuma uses the concept of “nuclear power village” to deal with these questions as they apply not only to Fukushima but also to other locations in Japan with nuclear power plants. He analyzes the problems that developed in the relationship of the capital region with other parts of Japan during the period of postwar economic development.

Let us briefly consider Kainuma’s use of the concept of “nuclear power village.” The Japanese word translated here as “village” is *mura* (村), which in the Japanese historical context tends to imply a closed and parochial rural community. Kainuma uses the “nuclear power village” moniker to refer not only to those areas outside the capital attempting to attract nuclear power but also to the closed and conservative nuclear administrations in the capital region. He criticizes these two nuclear power villages for “seeming to be dealing with the hypermodernity of nuclear power while in fact being entirely premodern” (14). In particular, Kainuma criticizes the fact that, in modern Japanese society, the relationship of the capital with local societies outside the capital region is made possible only by the complete submission of those local societies. Even after the collapse of Japanese imperialism, regions outside the capital have been able to participate in economic development only through voluntary submission to the internal colonialism of the

capital. Indeed, former opponents of nuclear power in their prefectures, faced with economic decline and impoverishment in their regions, have often been forced to “protect their village” by changing their approach in order to obtain more from the center. Furthermore, once nuclear power plants are established in a given locale, the inhabitants of that locale tend to avoid making any statement likely to spread unease about nuclear power. This, Kainuma argues, is the origin of the “nuclear power village” and of local societies that fully embrace nuclear power. Moreover, Kainuma claims that Japan’s “nuclear power village” has survived essentially unchanged despite the earthquake.

The two books discussed here share a similar understanding of Japanese society in the third millennium. Both are impressive works that analyze the relationship between technology and society and reveal an active, if critical, commitment to understanding Japanese society and culture. Hamano takes a new approach to the Japanese Internet that is quite different from the episodic reflections or marketing-inspired approaches that have generally characterized Internet research. Kainuma, meanwhile, deals directly with some of the most important issues facing Japan following the 2011 earthquake and nuclear disaster by analyzing how nuclear power has developed between the capital and other regions of Japan.

Moreover, both authors, although working within the Japanese academic tradition, avoid the trap of Japanese particularism that is characteristic of Japanology. Instead, they both suggest possibilities for new theoretical approaches to Japanese studies as a branch of regional studies. They differ, however, in the origin of the concepts that they employ. Hamano explores the Internet, which developed in the West in general and the United States in particular, and investigates the formation of the Japanese Internet’s particular architecture. Kainuma, by contrast, uses the concept of *mura*, previously employed by sociologists of Japan’s traditional agricultural society, to reexamine the larger theme of the role played in the production of nuclear energy by disparities between the capital and other regions of Japan.

What do these two books tell us about Japanese society, either pre- or postdisaster? Notably, neither Hamano, who was born in 1980, nor Kainuma, who was born in 1984, truly experienced the postwar system of high economic growth that is symbolized by the bubble economy of the 1980s. Indeed, that period is presumably ancient history for both authors. Japan’s younger generation is likely to perceive the Great East Japan Earthquake as just one

more nearly fatal blow to an already declining Japanese society. Perhaps Kainuma has correctly understood the reality of present-day Japanese society when he suggests that nothing has changed fundamentally in postdisaster Japan.

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Notes

1. Winny is a Windows-based, Japanese peer-to-peer (P2P) file-sharing program which claims to be loosely inspired by the design principles behind the Freenet network, which makes user identities untraceable. (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Winny>, Accessed on June 18, 2012).

References

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