

# Japanese Ethical Changes and Literary Works after Disaster

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**Abstract** The Japanese people have experienced many changes in their lives from frequent natural disasters, including earthquakes and tsunamis. These changes are reflected in the literary works after the occurrence of natural disasters, which touch on ethical changes ranging from individual reflection to sociopolitical change. This paper explores the ethical changes that have occurred in Japan after natural disasters from ancient times to the present, and examines their influence on relevant literary works. The emperor reflected on his lacking virtue and devoted himself to exemplary government after the occurrence of natural disasters in the Heian period or the last division of classical Japanese history. But authority moved to the warrior class and the social trend of linking disasters with the unethical nature of the emperor weakened in the Middle Ages. Disasters began to be considered not as a punishment by transcendent beings but as a natural phenomenon caused by the harmony of the elements in nature. The characteristics of disasters included humor and personal appearance in Edo era or early modern period. And then there was a movement to pass or shift the responsibilities of failure in disaster prevention on to specific subjects to overcome disastrous situations at the beginning of the modern era. A lot of disaster literary works were written after 3.11. It means disaster literature has recalled the ethics and values that should not be forgotten by Japanese society.

**Key words** Japanese Disaster Literature; Ethical Changes; Earthquakes; Tsunami

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## Introduction

The Great East Japan Earthquake that hit Japan on March 11, 2011 shocked not only its direct victims, the Japanese, but also people around the world who watched the disaster in real time through the media. Successive disasters — major earthquakes, tsunamis, and nuclear power plant accidents — put Japanese society in a state of lethargy, and writers began to describe the disasters in their own way, in a genre known as disaster literature.

Ancient disaster records were part of history. Municipalities recorded the cause of a disaster and a damage degree to control the country. These records are like TV news and newspaper nowadays. Therefore, writers tried to record only the facts excluding their feelings.

As disasters are emergency situations directly related to human lives, disaster literature contains vivid descriptions of human nature. Yet the genre of disaster literature is relatively unknown in academia, with little research on the topic. If ancient literature is also included, the proportion of studies on disaster literature is even smaller. This paper therefore analyzes Japanese disaster literature focusing on one common keyword: ethics. Through this diachronic study, the flow of disaster literature will be clarified and ethical changes in Japanese society for each age will be investigated.

## Emperor to personal: From ancient to early modern

Ancient Japanese records include articles on natural disasters and the coping methods of repentance and prayer. *Nihon Shoki* ( 日本書紀 , *The Chronicles of Japan*), for example, contains records of the drought that occurred in Kyoto in 642. According to that text, in order to overcome the continuing drought, people followed their priest’s instructions to slaughter cows and offer them to heaven as a

sacrifice and to pray to the river god, but there was no change. Soga no Emishi (蘇我蝦夷, 586-645)<sup>1</sup>, a man of power of the time, said that people should read the Buddhist doctrine, repent their sins, and pray for rain in accordance with Buddha's teaching. However, according to the text, these acts brought only a little rain. Thus the emperor knelt down and prayed, and it rained for five days<sup>2</sup>.

*Nihon Shoki* demonstrates the kind of efforts made by Japanese society to overcome natural disasters and how their endeavors changed over time. People believed that as human beings could not control natural disasters they had to rely on transcendental beings, such as local deities, Buddha, and the emperor. However, as can be seen from the description included in *Nihon Shoki* in which natural disasters were remedied by the emperor's prayer, Japanese people began to think that the emperor was responsible for natural disasters. This implies that Japanese society accepted Chinese Confucianism as a political ideology.

According to Confucianism, the emperor rules the country on behalf of heaven and the most important component required for an emperor is virtue. If the emperor lacks virtue, heaven can replace him at any time. The people and vassals can punish the emperor on behalf of heaven, and this was the foundation of dynastic revolutions.

Since disaster-prevention technology did not exist in ancient Japan, natural disasters beyond human knowledge were regarded as ominous signs and as heavenly punishment for the lack of virtue of the emperor. The emperor of Japan was also alert to disasters for the sake of maintaining his position. With disaster-prevention technology non-existent, the emperor reflected on his lacking virtue and devoted himself to exemplary government after the occurrence of natural disasters.

As exchanges with foreign countries increased in 735, smallpox began to spread around the Dazaifu<sup>3</sup> region, the center of trade. The emperor aimed to govern wisely and reflected on his lacking virtue, saying, "Although I lack virtue, I am reigning over the people. My political ability is not good enough to rule my people properly. Recent frequent disasters have made me realize my lack of virtue, severely burdening me with responsibilities. I should stop the deaths of my people and take care of the poor. I must grant amnesty" (Zatshi-shya 680).

As shown above, disasters in ancient Japan were linked to the unethical nature of the absolute and were expected to be overcome through goodness. However, in the Middle Ages, authority moved to the warrior class and the social trend of

1 A Japanese statesman of the Yamato Imperial Court.

2 Kojima Noriyuki, et al.5. *Nihon Shoki*(3) 1998:63-65.

3 Dazaifu(太宰府) is a city located in Fukuoka(福岡) Prefecture.

linking disasters with the unethical nature of the emperor weakened. An essay written in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, *Hojoki* (方丈記, *square-jō record*), contains detailed records of disasters that occurred at that time. The author objectively recorded the damage of fires, gusts, and earthquakes, and analyzed, “Among the four elements that constitute the world, water, fire, and wind always cause damage...People are talking about the transience of life. Although it seems that their foolishness was also partly erased...” (Chyomei 25)<sup>1</sup>. That is, he understood disasters as a part of natural phenomena and discussed the transience and futility of life through the loss of lives and buildings caused by disasters. Furthermore, as seen from “*Although it seems that their foolishness was also partly erased...*”<sup>2</sup> (25) with the occurrence of natural disasters, he even expected that individual ethics would be purified.

This tendency was related to Buddhism, a foreign religion, which became highly influential not only to the ruling class but also to the general public. Disasters began to be considered not as a punishment by transcendent beings but as a natural phenomenon caused by the harmony of the elements in nature. By showing the helplessness of human beings facing natural disasters, the author of *Hojoki* expected that people would be able to understand the Buddhist doctrine that human beings are finite.

During medieval times, Japan saw continuous wars as well as disasters. While witnessing the rise and decline of men in power through repeated warfare, people realized the finite nature of human beings by equating wars and disasters.

After the end of the long wars, there was a peaceful age of 260 years which lasted from 1603 to 1868, but even in this peaceful era disasters could not be avoided. At the time, commoners actively accumulated knowledge which they used to create and share various records. The records of disasters also skyrocketed. After the publication of *Kanameishi* (かなめいし, *Kaname Stone*) in 1663, the records of earthquakes began to have a common structure<sup>3</sup>: (1) describing the experience or learned information of earthquakes; (2) making it into a story by inserting sad stories or anecdotes of loyal subjects; (3) introducing various theories about the causes of earthquakes; (4) listing the records of earthquakes in Japan in a chronological format; (5) describing how wonderful it was now to have sufficient aid and relief. Among these, the second stage was the most important part. Authors

1 四大種の中に、水・火・風は、常に害をなせど、…人皆あぢきなき事を述べて、聊か、心の濁りも薄らぐと見えしか…

2 聊か、心の濁りも薄らぐと見えしかど…

3 Kitahara Itoko, *Nihon Saigai-si (History of disaster of Japan)* (Tokyo:Yoshikawa Kobunkan, 2007) 239.

recorded in detail how people with different backgrounds encountered disasters and lost lives/survived.

Another feature of *Kanameishi* is that it depicts the damage of the affected people in a funny way. Ryoi Asai( 浅井了意 , 1612-1691) who wrote *Kanameishi* was a Buddhist priest. He was also known as a prestigious writer of *Kanazoshi*( 仮名草子 ), which is a genre of Japanese literature. He described people realistically, but did not forget to use the humor in his work. And at the end of the novel, he tried to teach a Buddhism lesson. These features also appeared in *Kanameishi* “Some man took hands of a prostitute and ran away because they thought that she was his wife. Some women escaped from her house with a jar because they thought that it was her son” (Asai 29).

Ryoi Asai humorously described people who were embarrassed when the fire broke out. Such a description is incomprehensible to the current ethics consciousness.

From the aspect of describing a disaster humorously, Namazu painting should be noted. Namazu is a catfish, which Japanese believed that it causes earthquakes. Especially, Namazu paintings were very popular when earthquakes happened from 1854 to 1855. These paintings also depicted disasters in humor as well as *Kanameishi*.

Japanese in the Edo era (1603-1868) accepted a disaster as an inevitable fate. Such ideas might be the influenced by Buddhism. But the relationship between humor and a disaster cannot be explained only in Buddhism. There was a lot of damages due to a disaster, but many more benefits. Reconstruction caused by fire and collapse resulted in economic revitalization. Thus, a disaster delivered people with both despair and hope at the same time. So, people could find humor in a disaster.

Another characteristic of the disaster record is the attention to individuals. Unlike previous records that focused on specific people, such as men of power or intellectuals, the records of disasters in the Edo period began to focus on unspecified individuals. Nanpo Ota ( 大田南畝 )’s essay *Yume no Uki Hashi* ( 夢のうき橋 , *The Bridge of Dreams*) containing the record of the collapse of the Eidai Bridge ( 永代橋 ) in 1807 introduces big collapses in history and the anecdotes of the victims similar to *Kanameishi* . However, *Yume no Uki Hashi* is primarily comprised of individual episodes of the victims, and many episodes contain the accurate names, addresses, genders, and ages of victims.

- The owner of the shop in Benkei-Bridge died.

- The wife of Sankuro Mitani died in villa in Huka-gawa River.(Saito, 39)

*Buko Jido-no-ki* ( 武江地動之記 , *The Ansei great earthquake records in Edo and Musashi province*), the record of the Ansei Earthquake (1854-1855), also consists of narratives that identify the victims. It is like a memorial to honor the deceased and honor their victims. The writer writes down on the following reasons: “Many people died in the cry. Or there is someone who survived. I had heard a lot of stories, and recorded everything” (Saito 33). These records are regarded as a modern memorial containing the records of victims and their names.

### **Disasters and Ethics in Modern Japanese Society**

During the pre-modern period, major ethical changes after experiencing disasters occurred in a sporadic form, leaving responsibility to the emperor or to transcendent beings, or engaging in individual ethical reflection. However, at the beginning of the modern period, a broader range of discussions about the responsibility of disasters began to take place on a popular level. This is related to the development of modern science and the role of the media as the mainstream discourse, which can be seen from the Kanto Earthquake in September 1, 1923.

Martial law was proclaimed on day following the Kanto Earthquake, and press control guidelines were delivered to various media. Meanwhile, after newspapers spread the groundless rumor that Joseon people had committed incendiarism and murder a massive massacre of Joseon people was conducted by the Japanese. The Kanto Earthquake was a catastrophe that occurred in the midst of national and international instability, including the rice riot in 1918 and the March First Independence Movement in 1919 in Chosen. The massacre of Joseon people that occurred at the time of the Kanto Earthquake can be seen as an expression of fatigue and anger of the Japanese who were suppressed under the depressed economy and social atmosphere, passing these responsibilities on to the Joseon people. This aspect is in stark contrast to that of the pre-modern period where people considered disasters as unavoidable or natural phenomena, seeking individual ethical reflection.

Such a change in the general public's ethos affected literary works, and the Great East Japan Earthquake was the most influential among disasters that occurred in modern times. The Great East Japan Earthquake (hereinafter referred to as “3.11”) that occurred on March 11, 2011 was a terrible incident that shook the foundation of Japanese society. Many changes occurred in Japan after 3.11 because of the Fukushima nuclear power plant disaster (hereinafter referred to as nuclear disaster), which was an unprecedented incident worldwide. The political situation of Japan

has also drastically changed due to the aftermath of 3.11.

“When considering politics as a human relations-related issue rather than as just a humanity-related issue”(Lee 188), political ethics should be discussed not in relation to morality or principles but in relation to how well it can satisfy members of society and how effectively it can resolve social conflicts. In this presentation, what kind of political leadership was needed in Japan after experiencing this nuclear disaster and how the consequent political and ethical changes were presented in literary works will be examined.

In Yoko Tawada’s short stories *The Island of Eternal Life* (不死の島)<sup>1</sup> and *A State of Enlightenment* (彼岸)<sup>2</sup>, the future political situation of Japan after experiencing significant changes caused by the nuclear disaster is depicted. These descriptions provide interesting interpretations of actual political and ethical changes that occurred in Japanese society.

*The Island of Eternal Life*, published after 3.11, begins with a scene in which the narrator living in year 2023 enters Germany. In this book, he has lived in Germany and had visited Japan once long ago. But, a German immigration officer to whom he hands his passport hesitates to even touch it, trembling with fear and horror.

The reason why Japan became an object of horror to the entire world is due to increased fear of radiation exposure. Nuclear power plants that had been suspended since March 11, 2011 renew operations, and thus Japan becomes an isolated country resulting from other countries’ fear of radioactive contamination. In 2017, another large earthquake and tsunami hit Japan, and all means of communication and transportation are destroyed. Now, Japan becomes a bizarre country where the elderly cannot die but must take care of young victims.

This story of Yoko Tawada looks surreal, but on the other hand, it is very realistic. Although they are only partial, political, economic, and public welfare issues after 3.11 are addressed. Later in 2014, Yoko Tawada published another book, *A State of Enlightenment*.

*A State of Enlightenment* begins with a scene in which a military transport aircraft crashes over a nuclear power plant. Japan has emphasized the safety of nuclear power plants since their reactivation after 3.11. However, another nuclear explosion occurs and Japan becomes a land of no living things. Japanese people who

1 It was included in Tawada Yoko’s *March Was Made of Yarn* a collection of short stories. This paper quoted from *March Was Made of Yarn* published in 2012.

2 It was first published in Waseda Bungaku (2014, Fall), and later, included in Tawada Yoko’s *Kentoshi*, a collection of short stories. This paper quoted from *Kentoshi* published in 2014.



left their country arrive in China as refugees and are required to clear immigration. *A State of Enlightenment* seems to be a story occurring sometime between 2011 and 2023, that is, between 3.11 and the year when Japan becomes the island of eternal life.<sup>1</sup>

In *The Island of Eternal Life*, the major political leaders of Japan appear, such as the emperor and the prime minister of Japan. One day, the close allies of the emperor and the prime minister, who oppose the operation of nuclear power plants, suddenly disappear, and the Japanese government carries forth the activation of nuclear power plants.

Sometime after the prime minister disappeared, in 2015, the Japanese government became privatized. An organization, self-styled as Group Z, bought the shares of the government and began to operate it as if it were a company. Broadcasting companies were also taken over, and compulsory education disappeared (*The Island of Eternal Life* 16).

An interesting point in this story is that the new government that tries to activate nuclear power plants is a privatized government, which is just like a company. One goal that the privatized government, which believes in neo-liberal market order, seeks is profit creation. “The Japanese government strongly promotes the operation of nuclear power plants as a national policy” (Koide 178). “Greedy economic rulers try to fully make use of their country for securing and expanding their interests” (Kamakura 162) and are helped by the tacit approval of Japanese people who have participated in creating the safety myth and the growth myth.

Kurihara Akira points out, “From national prosperity and military power in the Meiji period, production increase in wartime, and high economic growth after the war to today’s global marketization, productivity nationalism was the core of Japanese politics” (2012, 335). Productivity nationalism refers to an ideology claiming that an increase in productivity brings prosperity and happiness, and it is necessary to make the whole pie (GDP) larger first in order to increase the size of each piece of the pie.

The revival nationalism that emerged after 3.11, also known as disaster nationalism, is similar to productivity nationalism. The mindset of only cheering for Japan without reflecting on their behavior or thinking, as seen in the quote, “It was us who caused this nuclear disaster” (Takahashi & Morimura 232), and impatience to go back to the Japan prior to 3.11 as soon as possible are other forms of

1 See Tawada Yoko, 2014.



productivity nationalism that seek revival. Based on these sentiments, the Japanese government promoted the reactivation of nuclear power plants. Actually, on August 11 in 2015, the No. 1 nuclear power plant in Satsumasendai city in Kagoshima was reactivated.

Without any time to think about the future, the next earthquake hit. The government announced that nothing was leaked from the four broken nuclear power plants, but I can't tell whether the announcement is reliable because it is a privatized government (*The Island of Eternal Life* 19-20).

As if it can foretell the future, *The Island of Eternal Life* depicts the state of Japanese society where the operation of nuclear power plants is resumed. Under the leadership of the privatized government, nuclear power plants are reactivated. However, another severe earthquake occurs and it causes a successive nuclear disaster, which is irreparable. After all, Japan is exposed to extreme radioactive contamination and becomes a peculiar island where the immortal elderly must look after sick young people — an isolated island without a future.

Another aspect of revival nationalism that emerges after the disaster is the chauvinism that accompanies the excessive admiration of Japan. While anxiety is spreading after the nuclear disaster, the “rediscovering Japan” boom starts. Beyond the dimension of loving and cherishing Japan, it has the potential to produce chauvinistic discourses.

Following this trend, the political parties declare the end of radioactive contamination and the restoration of nuclear safety and actively formed the discourse on the admiration of Japan: Japan will not only overcome the disaster but also become a stronger country and even a paradise on earth. In addition, Japan adopted a hostile attitude towards neighboring countries, such as Korea and China, and thus diplomatic conflicts with these countries were deepened more so than before the disaster. Japan also attempted to amend the constitution in order to become a stronger country.

Sede (瀬出), a character in *A State of Enlightenment*, is a politician who does not hesitate to spew reckless remarks on nearby countries, such as China. Sede starts making such ludicrous comments on China for a very personal reason. When being asked a sharp question on foreign policy from a newspaper reporter, in a fit of anger, Sede accidentally utters insults about China. At that moment, he realized that his genitalia are clearly responding, which had been inactive for a while:

Sitting in a chair in the waiting room, Sede was contemplating how to make an excuse for the misstatement he just made. He tried to cross his legs as usual, but it did not work. Due to the strange feeling in the lower part of his body, he gently lifted his fat belly, holding his breath. Soon, he realized that his long-time worry was resolved. Sede slowly moved his right hand from his knee to his private part to check. (*A state of Enlightenment* 213)

And “The strong nationalism that emerged in Japan after losing the war to the U.S. is closely related to its attempt to restore masculinity, which was ruined by the U.S., and building a new national identity” (Cho 341). Japan, which was castrated after the war, tried to recover its masculinity in order to remove the wounds and memories of defeat, seeking strengthened nationalism and national integration. In order to build masculinity, there must be a feminine subject who can arouse masculinity. Both before and after the war, other East Asian countries, such as Korea and China, were forced to be the feminine subjects that enable Japan to restore its masculinity.

The above scene in which Sede realizes that his genitalia responds to his absurd remarks about China reminds us that Japanese nationalism was actually established in order to suppress other East Asian countries. After confirming that his masculinity is recovered, Sede comes to indulge in insulting China. Such behavior of Sede conveys the psychology of Japan, which tried to affirm its existence through chauvinistic nationalism discourses after the nuclear disaster and the political actions that tried to use this psychology as a ground for political ethics.

The nuclear disaster and consequent radioactive contamination have caused an irreversible situation in Japan. Nevertheless, Japan tried to chase the illusion of an unchanged Japan even after the nuclear disaster, and this sentiment is related to the changes in political ethics. After the nuclear disaster, Japanese politics responded to the public demand for a stronger Japan (or the government made use of such a sentiment to maintain the regime). As a result, chauvinistic diplomacy has deepened, and nuclear power plants have begun to be activated again.

Yoko Tawada’s *The Island of Eternal Life* and *A State of Enlightenment* directly depict political activities based on revival nationalism rather than universally valid political ethics and values. It is important to note the conclusions of these books. The privatized government promotes the reactivation of nuclear power plants, and Japan becomes an isolated island due to another nuclear disaster. As a result of the people’s implicit consent to productivity nationalism, Japanese society faced

a dreadful accident, a nuclear disaster. Nonetheless, the Japanese government still focuses on the formation of nationalism discourse, which seems to be a form of self-comfort, by announcing the completion of the restoration of the nuclear disaster and pushing forward with the preparation of the Tokyo Olympics.

## Conclusion

From ancient times to the present, various disaster literary works have been created in Japan. By providing records of the diverse aspects of disasters and the stories of the people who experience them, these disaster literary works allow people to predict changes in Japanese society after disasters strike. Among the many aspects that can be explored through disaster literature, this paper focused on post-disaster changes in ethos.

Changes in ethics after disasters relate primarily to the reasons for the disaster and the responsible parties. In the pre-modern era, people tended to accept natural disasters as inevitable phenomena caused by transcendental beings. In addition, the nature of the ruling class and the dominance of particular religions and academic philosophies greatly affected attitudes toward disasters. Before the Middle Ages, as seen from the records containing the belief that the emperor's lack of virtue caused natural disasters, people attempted to blame disasters on the unethical nature of those with absolute power, whereas this tendency weakened as warriors seized power in the Middle Ages. Upon realizing that natural disasters are not punishment from transcendental beings but inevitable natural phenomena, people began to expect individual ethics to be purified instead of shifting responsibility on to the absolute.

However, at the beginning of the modern era, there was a movement to pass or shift the responsibilities of failure in disaster prevention on to specific subjects to overcome disastrous situations. The massive massacre of the Chosen people at the time of the Kanto Earthquake was an extreme case which resulted from this tendency.

After the occurrence of the catastrophic 3.11 disaster, universally valid ethics and values were buried under the fanatic cries of, "Cheer up, Japan," led by the government and the mainstream discourse of the media, disregarding the irrevocable reality of radioactive effluent caused by nuclear accidents. In this regard, disaster literature after 3.11 has indicated and described this phenomenon and recalled the ethics and values that should not be forgotten by Japanese society.

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