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Editor's Introduction

We are pleased to introduce the summer 2013 issue of *Asia Pacific Perspectives*. This issue brings together the voices of scholars from Canada, Australia, Britain, and Japan as it considers the interaction between the international and the local in East Asia today.

The first two articles examine the issue of human rights from different perspectives. **David Webster** looks at the struggle for independence in Timor-Leste in terms of local agency. He argues that a regional actor successfully appealed to the international community for support by using human rights norms as a leverage issue. **Silvia Croydon** analyzes the development of a concerted regional approach to the question of human rights in East and Southeast Asia. She finds that there are many challenges to the creation of a regional approach, but that progress is being made.

Looking at the recent tension surrounding maritime disputes in East Asia, **Mike Chia-Yu Huang** asks what drives China's increasingly "assertive" foreign policy. He argues that the number of actors in decision-making has led to inconsistent policy, and that this causes tension between domestic factions, neighboring states, and global powers. **Felicity Greenland** also addresses the conflict between local experiences and international norms, using research on traditional folk songs. She describes a rich and established cultural history of whaling in Japan, a legacy put under pressure by current global environmental concerns.

Finally, with this issue, *Asia Pacific Perspectives* introduces a new type of article, one we are calling "Think Piece." This new series will allow contributors to respond to current events and big ideas in the Asia-Pacific region in a shorter, more informal style that integrates personal opinion informed by scholarship and the author's expertise. We hope you will find value in our first "Think Piece" by **Pablo Figueroa** on the Fukushima nuclear-reactor situation in Japan.

Dayna Barnes, Managing Editor

John Nelson, Editor

Editors' Note

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When the Tide Goes out: Citizen Participation in Japan after the Fukushima Nuclear Disaster

Pablo Figueroa, *Waseda University*

Two hands clap and there is a sound. What is the sound of one hand? (Zen koan)

In October 2011 I wrote, "The Great East Japan Earthquake and ensuing tsunami triggered one of the worst nuclear catastrophes in history. Large ocean waves flooded the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant, a facility run by Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO), causing the loss of all power sources needed to cool down nuclear reactor cores. Unable to operate emergency generators, the facility was left severely crippled and vast amounts of radioactive materials were released into the environment. Half a year after the accident, the Japanese government and TEPCO are still having serious difficulties in bringing the nuclear crisis to an end."¹

I wish I could say the crisis is over and that the dismantling efforts of the crippled plant along with the recovery of Tohoku are well underway. Sadly, this is not the case. Uncertainty surrounding the long-term consequences of the Fukushima nuclear disaster is ongoing; the cleanup efforts and the rebuilding of Tohoku have proved more difficult than previously estimated. Although the authorities announced in December 2011 that the plant had reached a state of "cold shutdown" (meaning the station is stable and that the release of radioactive materials is under control), many unsettling issues appear unresolved. TEPCO is still struggling at Fukushima Daiichi with lack of space for storing highly contaminated water, storage tanks that leak, recurrent failure in the jerry-rigged reactors' cooling systems, an unknown situation surrounding the nuclear cores, and a sketchy plan to decommission the facility. Most critical is the state of the number 4 reactor (a common storage pool for spent nuclear rods), which may not resist another strong tremor. The building was badly damaged during the nuclear crisis, and concern about the vulnerability of its structure is widespread. Should this fragile building containing the spent nuclear fuel collapse, and the water covering the fuel leak away, there might be explosions, and as a result the amount of radiation released would be massive (It would equal 85 times the amount of Cesium-137 released by Chernobyl). Such a cataclysmic event would

¹ Figueroa, P. "Risk Communication Surrounding the Fukushima Nuclear Disaster: An Anthropological Approach". *Asia Europe Journal*: vol. 11, issue 1 (2013), 53-64. DOI: 10.1007/s10308-013-0343-9, Springer-Verlag.

lead to the mandatory evacuation of Tokyo metropolitan area (population over 35 million), something inconceivable by definition.²

Moreover, Japan's handling of the disaster generated widespread anxiety among its citizens. Due to partial, delayed, and ambiguous information, people grew distrustful of the government's honesty in informing about nuclear risks. For many observers, the Japanese government downplayed the seriousness of the crisis. Society at large lost trust in the nuclear regulatory bodies, the central government, and the nuclear industry.

Welcome to the Risk Society

For the first time in generations, the Japanese people were violently confronted with a tangible nuclear risk, and they felt betrayed: since its inception in 1954, the government repeatedly assured its citizens that nuclear power was safe. A serious accident, so they were told, was not a possibility. Despite the opposition of antinuclear movements in the 1960s and 1970s, which underscored that safety of the construction and operation of nuclear power plants had yet to be proved, the government decided to gear up and implement a national economic development project that relied heavily on nuclear power. By 2011, 54 nuclear reactors accounted for 30% of the total production of electricity in Japan. The government had ambitious plans to expand that share to 50% by 2030.³ But the Fukushima nuclear disaster and the tsunami brought those aspirations to a halt. Damages to infrastructure, industry, and the local communities were enormous. More than 150,000 people suffered from displacement; social ties among local communities were virtually destroyed. Radiation fears affected thousands, especially the mothers of Fukushima children. Suddenly, nuclear power was not anymore the promised land that many had been led to believe in. People started to realize that splitting atoms could damage their social fabric and ruin the environment for years to come. As one newspaper put it, after Fukushima nuclear power became "the dream that failed."⁴

Antinuclear Renaissance

Following the tragedy, some speculated that the Fukushima nuclear disaster would not have a long-lasting effect on the so-called "nuclear village." In other words, they expected the nuclear industry to come out of this event unscathed. (The nuclear village is famous for being able to shield itself from governmental regulations and public criticism). Others believed this was a unique chance to phase out nuclear energy once and for all. Both views proved overly simplistic.

What the Fukushima nuclear disaster did was to trigger a renaissance of the Japanese antinuclear citizen groups, which had been relatively marginal in recent times. Dozens of antinuclear associations were formed and existing ones

² For an extended discussion on the spent nuclear fuel, see Shaun Burnie, Matsumura Akio and Murata Mitsuhei, "The Highest Risk: Problems of Radiation at Reaction Unit 4, Fukushima Daiichi," *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, vol. 10, issue 17, No. 4. April 23, 2012. <http://www.japanfocus.org/-Murata-Mitsuhei/3742#sthash.EqFPPj9w.dpuf>.

³ Bird, W. "Powering Japan's Future". *Japan Times*, 2011/07/24. http://www.japantimes.co.jp/life/2011/07/24/general/powering-japans-future/#.UcJL_JXgIb4.

⁴ See *The Economist's* report, "The dream that failed". <http://www.economist.com/node/21549936>.

regained strength. Regular weekly protests were scheduled in front of the prime minister's official residence; technologically savvy citizen groups were able to bypass official denial and underrepresentation in the media through smart use of digital social networks. And the disaster also forced the state to rethink energy policies altogether, including the viability of nuclear plants in highly seismic areas.

Such widespread discomfort with nuclear power, however, is not new: Japanese people have never been completely satisfied with the nuclear program. Although the state discourse has traditionally emphasized the efficiency of atomic power, studies show a stark contrast between official views and the citizens' standpoint. Public polls conducted by Asahi Newspaper show a steady decrease in the support for nuclear power since the 1986 Chernobyl accident.⁵ 2011 surveys of public opinion indicate that support for nuclear energy plummeted after the Fukushima disaster, with as much as 74% of respondents agreeing with the replacement of nuclear energy with alternative sources.⁶ Today, despite the nuclear regulators assurances that some of the reactors can be safely restarted, the public at large still opposes nuclear power. According to a recent poll, 75% of Japanese companies support greener paths to sustainability.⁷

Fueled by TEPCO's long history of coverups, multiple falsifications, and submission of fake data, the antinuclear movement started to gain momentum throughout Japan. In July 2012 over 75,000 people gathered in central Tokyo to protest against nuclear power, making it the largest public protest in more than five decades. The crowds, although visibly angry with the government because of its ineptitude in dealing with the nuclear issue, marched along the designated lanes in a peaceful and orderly manner, closely escorted by the police. Some observers ventured that the rally was colorful but ineffective because it did not apply political pressure were it needed to be applied. People voiced their opinions but the central government remained oblivious to them. In the state's discourse, laypersons' views are usually dismissed as irrational and uninformed.⁸

All Japanese nuclear power plants went offline in 2012 due to safety checks. As expected, the Liberal Democratic Party [LDP], which has close ties with the nuclear business sector, strongly argued that the country needed to restart the reactors for economic reasons. According to the LDP, the country could simply not afford to phase out nuclear energy. Current prime minister Shinzo Abe has said many times that he would allow the reactors' restart if their safety can be ensured. Most recently, Japan's NRA nuclear watchdog announced an overhaul in the safety guidelines that could allow the comeback of some reactors early next year. The new guidelines were announced in a public meeting where people were shouting "No reactor restarts!" "Take more time to ensure the safety of reactors!" and "Listen to the public!"⁹

⁵ Kondoh 2009, p.64; Kotler and Hillman 2000, 23.

⁶ *Mainichi Daily News* Poll, 2011/08/22.

⁷ See Reuters poll, "Three-quarters of Japanese firms oppose nuclear power". <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/05/25/us-japan-nuclear-poll-idUSBRE84O08J20120525>.

⁸ See *Japan Daily Press* "PM Abe administration approves white paper on energy policy, dismisses zero nuclear goal". <http://japandailynews.com/pm-abe-administration-approves-white-paper-on-energy-policy-dismisses-zero-nuclear-goal-1530653>.

⁹ <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/20/world/asia/japan-nuclear-safety-guidelines.html>.

What this suggests is that despite people's fears, the government is unilaterally pursuing the restart of the reactors as soon as possible. The inclusion of citizen participation in decision-making processes is not considered an option. In March, the ruling LDP removed most antinuclear researchers from an energy policy advisory board to the government and replaced them with nuclear energy-friendly advisers.

Voices Unheard

After two years of repeated protests with ambiguous results, the antinuclear movement appears to have lost momentum. Public attention has shifted from nuclear politics to economic policies. Prime minister Abe gains extended media coverage of the much-discussed "Abenomics", a set of monetary, fiscal, and economic policies aimed at encouraging private investment. Virtually everyone in Japan is expecting that these strategies will help the country recover from a prolonged recession.

But the nuclear issue remains, and people's trust in the institutions has yet to be regained. For this, transparency, citizen participation, and joint decision-making are essential. The Japanese government has traditionally separated anti-nuclear movements from the national nuclear energy decision-making process by imposing constraints on the movements. Given this background and the recent surge of citizen associations, people's perceptions should be acknowledged by the authorities. Rather than facilitating a two-way dialogue, the electric utilities and the regulators have understood public participation as a mere formality devoid of true significance.

Can I Trust You?

It is time perhaps for the government, the nuclear regulators and the nuclear industry, to reconfigure their relationship with the citizens in a more inclusive manner. The nuclear industry should acknowledge that people's perceptions of nuclear risk do matter and incorporate representatives of the citizen movements into the energy discussions. On the other hand, to have protests translated into concrete results the antinuclear groups should create stronger alliances, agree on unified proposals, and align with an existing political party. This would enable them to interact more effectively with politicians, stakeholders, and other decision-makers.

The Fukushima disaster demolished the safety myth of nuclear power in Japan. Systemic failure and corruption of the very institutions that had the duty of ensuring public safety has deepened preexisting fault lines in Japanese society. Most citizens have raised multiple concerns regarding the use of nuclear energy. And yet their voices have not been heard. People feel betrayed, and this psychological wound is bleeding steadily.

For Japan to heal, it is essential to regain mutual trust, build confidence, and to incorporate citizen participation. So far, the nuclear dialogue has been like the sound produced by one hand clapping.

Pablo Figueroa is an Assistant Professor at Waseda University in Tokyo. A cultural anthropologist specializing in Japanese Studies, his research interests include nuclear politics, natural and man-made disasters, and the communication of risk during catastrophic accidents. He can be reached at: pablo.figueroa@aoni.waseda.jp.