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## THE HUMAN-MADE ASPECT OF DISASTERS. A PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE FROM JAPAN

### Abstract

What is a disaster? This paper explores the different hermeneutic levels that need to be taken into consideration when approaching this question through the case of Japan. Instead of a view of disasters as spatiotemporal events, we approach disasters from the perspective of the milieu. First, based on the Japanese «dictionaries of disasters», the Japanese vocabulary of disaster is described. Second, this paper reviews briefly the Japanese interdisciplinary disaster-management tradition. To highlight the human-made aspect of disasters, the idea of *fūdo* 風土 is introduced. This concept allows us to see disasters as a phenomenon of the milieu, which emerges from the co-constitutive relations between individuals, communities, and the local environment. The final part debates the narratives by some national and international political actors that link «Japanese identity and culture» to disaster management and sometimes include

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nationalist claims rooted in the essentialization of the «Japanese exception». Given the cruciality of sociocultural and political representations of disasters tied to identity politics, and the increasing frequency and intensity of disasters, a long-term, local people-focused and culturally sensitive perspective on disasters might be better adapted to the climate change era.

**Keywords:** disaster, Japanese philosophy, resilience, Japan, *fūdo* 風土, essentialism.

### O lado antrópico dos desastres. Uma perspectiva filosófica a partir do Japão.

#### Resumo

O que é um desastre? Este artigo explora os diferentes níveis hermenêuticos que devem ser tidos em consideração ao se abordar esta questão através do caso do Japão. Em vez de uma visão dos desastres como eventos espaço-temporais, abordam-se os desastres a partir da perspectiva do *milieu*. Primeiro, com base nos “dicionários de desastres” japoneses, descreve-se o respectivo vocabulário japonês. Em segundo lugar, o artigo faz uma breve revisão da tradição interdisciplinar japonesa de gestão dos desastres. Para salientar o aspecto humano dos desastres, é introduzida a ideia de *fūdo* 風土. Este conceito permite-nos ver os desastres como um fenómeno do *milieu*, que emerge das relações co-constitutivas entre indivíduos, comunidades, e o ambiente local. A última parte discute as narrativas de alguns actores políticos nacionais e internacionais que ligam a «identidade e cultura japonesas» à gestão das catástrofes e por vezes incluem reivindicações nacionalistas inculcadas na essencialização da «exceção japonesa». Dada a importância fundamental das representações socioculturais e políticas das catástrofes ligadas à política de identidade e a crescente frequência e intensidade das catástrofes, uma perspectiva a longo prazo, centrada na população local e culturalmente sensível às catástrofes poderia ser melhor adaptada à era da mudança climática.

**Palavras-chave:** catástrofe, filosofia japonesa, resiliência, Japão, *fūdo* 風土, essencialismo.

### Introduction

The idea of disaster was extensively developed in Japan. The word for disaster, «*saigai*» (災害) can include earthquakes, landslides, typhoons, floods, droughts, volcanic eruptions, fires, and, by extension, industrial disasters (such as pollution) as well as nuclear disasters. It is composed of the characters 災 (which can be pronounced *sai* or *wazawa(-i)*, and is etymologically linked to the idea of «fire» but commonly refers to «misfortune» or «trouble») and 害 (which can be pronounced *kai*, *gai*, *katsu* or *gachi* and commonly refers to «harm» or «damage»). Yet, this word refers to events that are extraordinary, that seriously affect many people, and that are

recorded and remembered by the society<sup>4</sup>.

Large-scale natural events that do not affect people are not recognized as disasters. To a certain extent, disasters are «human-made» insofar as they affect people *because* people were present in this area and, for instance, *because* they built houses not resistant enough and lacked preparedness measures. The separation between human causes and natural causes is blurred. Local communities arrange their surroundings and adapt their culture throughout their history in a particular place. Therefore, how a community is affected by a specific «natural» event depends largely on how they interacted with and adapted their ways of life to the local environment. This latter aspect is captured in Japanese by the idea of *fūdo* (風土), which has been translated as «milieu»<sup>5</sup>. In the milieu, human and natural aspects are inseparable, and local culture rhythms daily and seasonal practices.

In this view, far from being exclusively event-centred, disasters are intertwined with daily disaster-preparedness practices, which, through time, become habits and key parts of culture and embodied identity. This paper shows that there are different hermeneutic levels that need to be taken into consideration when approaching the question of what a disaster is. First, this paper presents the Japanese vocabulary of disaster based on the Japanese «dictionaries of disasters». Second, the human-made aspect of disasters is explored through a brief interdisciplinary exploration of the disaster-management tradition of Japan, including international frameworks and practices of disaster risk management. Third, we briefly paint the idea of *fūdo* 風土. Fourth, we mobilize the framework of the milieu and propose to see disasters as a phenomenon of the milieu, which emerges from the co-constitutive relations between individuals, communities, and the local environment. Fifth, based on the case of Japan, we discuss the essentialist temptation, namely, the slippery slope of the rhetoric of disasters intertwined with identity politics. This part debates the narratives by some national and international political actors that link «Japanese identity and culture» to disaster management and sometimes includes nationalist claims rooted in the essentialization of the «Japanese exception». Finally, this paper concludes by zooming out to explore possible implications in the global context of climate change.

This article is the result of a collaboration between a philosopher specialized in Japanese philosophy, a researcher in global environmental ethics, and a historian specialized in 20th century Japanese political and social thoughts. This interdisciplinarity is reflected in the paper, both in the sources and in the methodological approach. Sources include philosophical texts, works from social

<sup>4</sup> See dictionaries such as: I. Shinmura, *Kōjien* 広辞苑, Iwanami shoten, Tokyo 2018 or A. Fukuda, Y. Kanda, T. Shintani, *et al.*, *The Great Dictionary of Japanese Folklore* 日本民俗大辞典, Yoshikawa kōbunkan, Tokyo 1999.

<sup>5</sup> T. Watsuji, *Fūdo. Le milieu humain*, translated and introduced by Augustin Berque, CNRS Éditions, Paris 2011.

sciences and humanities on disasters as well as gray literature such as reports by governments and international organizations on disaster management. Historically, disciplines such as geography, religious studies and ethnography have worked on the concept of disaster, sometimes within the prisms of imperialism and nationalism. Therefore, we are careful to take all our sources critically.

## 1. The Japanese Vocabulary of Disaster

Words have a history. This history is marked by the one of the places and the cultures through which words have evolved over the time. This historical background can be echoed in connotations that the words used today have for speakers, and in the ways they are used, in particular in daily life.

Words like «disaster», «catastrophe», «calamity» or «tragedy» stem from Greek and Latin. Even if the semantic content of such expressions tends to be also used by speakers of some non-Indo-European languages under the influence of globalization and so-called Western sciences, local meanings and images remain influential. The Japanese representations about disaster are rooted in local culture and language, local way of life and everyday experiences that constitute a part of the Japanese milieu (*fūdo* 風土). We conduct an inquiry into Japanese words used to say «disaster» or «catastrophe», and explain their main connotations.

Japanese vocabulary is composed of *yamato kotoba* 大和言葉 or *wago* 和語 (native Japanese word), *kango* 漢語 (Chinese [rooted] word) and *gairaigo* 外来語 (loan word). Words classified as *yamato kotoba* are rooted in native Japanese classical and modern language. Words classified as *kango* are Chinese expressions or words constructed on Chinese roots. Words known as *gairaigo* are phonetic transcriptions of foreign vocabulary —most of these words came from Indo-European languages. To express in Japanese the idea of «disaster» or «catastrophe», words from these three sources exist. For instance, the word *wazawai* (災い or 禍) is a *yamato kotoba* that is usually translated into English by «misfortune» and in French by «malheur», «mal» or «calamité». It refers to gods' punishment or angry souls' revenge. Research has shown that such a representation was common in pre-Meiji Japan<sup>6</sup>.

The word *wazawai* (災い or 禍) is also connected to individual behaviours like

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<sup>6</sup> Many pre-Meiji conceptualizations had been marginalized, without completely disappearing, with the modernization of Japan that had been politically encouraged during the Meiji era (1868-1912). Such views remain important to understand local conceptualization of the relationships between human, non-human and local environment as well as local «religious» rituals. For instance, Hamano's research shows that earthquakes had been explained diversely across history depending on local faith, Buddhist's explanations, yin and yang theories, and astronomical conceptions. M. Hamano, «Perception of Earthquakes in Medieval Japan as Seen from the Records» 記録表現にみる中世日本の地震認識, 立命館文學 = *The journal of cultural sciences*, 668 (2020), p. 1957.

in the expression *kuchi wa wazawai no moto* 口は禍の元<sup>7</sup> which means «spoken words are the origin of misfortune». Another interesting expression is *wazawai tenjite fuku to nasu* 災い転じて福となす which means «turn misfortune into a blessing». It refers to the idea that misfortune could also present opportunities<sup>8</sup>. The most common translation of the English «disaster» in disaster management is the word *saigai* 災害. This *kango* 漢語 is composed of two characters. The first one can be read *wazawa(-i)* in *kun'yomi* 訓読み (Japanese rooted pronunciation of Chinese characters) or *sai* in *on'yomi* 音読み (Chinese rooted pronunciation of Chinese characters). It means «misfortune». The second one can be read *kai*, *gai*, *katsu* or *gachi* in *on'yomi* and means «harm» or «damage».

Other words can be used to refer more precisely to a category of disaster such as *jishin-saigai* 地震災害 (earthquake disaster), *kazan-saigai* 火山災害 (volcanic disaster), *tsunami-saigai* 津波災害 (tsunami disaster) *fūsuigai* 風水害 (wind and flood damage), *dosha-saigai* 土砂災害 (landslide disaster) or *kasai* 火災 (fire)<sup>9</sup>. Japanese language also encompassed words that distinguish between «natural disaster» (*shizen-saigai* 自然災害 or *tensai* 天災) and human disaster (*jinteki-saigai* 人的災害 or *jinsai* 人災). The choice of wording sometimes leads to minimizing the importance of a disaster. It is, for instance, the case concerning Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster which is officially called in Japanese «accident of the Fukushima's first nuclear power plant» *Fukushima daiichi genshiryoku hatsudensho jiko* 福島第一原子力発電所事故<sup>10</sup>. This official expression, which suggests that it was a simple «accident» does not fit the habitual description of this event that is considered as a «compound disaster» (*fukugō-saigai* 複合災害). The word «catastrophe» is sometimes used as *gairaigo* 外来語 (loan word) —pronounced *katasutorofu* カタストロフ (from the French) or *katasutorofi* カタストロフイ (from the English)— to refer to a «sudden cataclysm» or a «great ruin»; to a tragic ending or climax in a play or in a novel. Such *gairaigo* reflect the widespread tendency of cultures and languages to absorb and adapt foreign cultural influences.

In Japan, there are also dictionaries specialized on disaster, which allow us to

<sup>7</sup> It exists alternative version of this expression such as *kuchi wa wazawai no moto* 口は災いの元 or *kuchi wa wazawai no mon* 口は禍の門.

<sup>8</sup> Readers of Berque's work may see here some similarities with his proposition to consider that events could be grasped according to four ways: as resources, constraints, risks or pleasures. Yoann Moreau developed on the importance of considering these four categories to grasp disasters in his study entitled: *Vivre avec les catastrophes*. See: A. Berque, *Poetics of the Earth. Natural History and Human History*, translated from French by A. -M. Feenberg-Dibon, Routledge, New York 2019 (2014), p. 168 and Y. Moreau, *Vivre avec les catastrophes*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris 2017, pp. 216-227.

<sup>9</sup> These categories are described in: I. Kitahara, R. Matsuura, R. Kimura, *Dictionary of Disasters in Japanese History* 日本歴史災害事典, Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, Tokyo 2012.

<sup>10</sup> This expression is regularly used by Japanese institutions, by the Japan Broadcasting Corporation (NHK), and by the plant operator of Fukushima's nuclear site, namely the Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO).

understand how disasters are grasped in the Japanese context. For instance, *The Great Dictionary of Japanese Folklore* lists the following characteristics for disasters:

- Damages to human life or social life due to an extraordinary natural phenomenon or to a human cause.
- Disasters occur even though human labour tries to answer local topography and climate.
- Changes resulting from natural phenomena without striking human life do not constitute a disaster. In this meaning, the concept of disaster expresses a relationship between human and nature.
- Disasters can be due to pure natural causes as well as by both natural causes and human ones. A typical case of pure natural causes is earthquakes.
- Damages caused by similar disasters can be aggravated by human elements.
- The impact of a disaster is influenced by the social system and the group structure<sup>11</sup>.

Such an explanation is not without ambiguities. Indeed, if it is stated that the cause of a disaster can be purely natural, it also explains that a disaster requires human beings and that the importance of a disaster differs following human criteria. For example, the efficient cause of an earthquake is the violent shaking of the ground. However, it does not necessarily lead to a disaster. It needs living beings struck by the purely natural event.

Furthermore, an earthquake of the same power can lead to diverse consequences depending on the «social system» and «group structure», but also on the quality of infrastructure, the «climate», the «topography», and, as we will see, the timeline of the earthquake. The impact of a disaster on human societies can also be limited by the quality of the response. The writers of *The Great Dictionary of Japanese Folklore* suggest that while measures depend more and more on the state and government, community-level participation remains important<sup>12</sup>.

## 2. Disaster Management and Japan

Disaster management researchers from diverse disciplines are using various definitions of disasters to delimit their study area. Perry classifies these definitions in three categories:

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<sup>11</sup> Fukuda, Kanda, Shintani, Nakagomi, Yukawa, Watanabe, *The Great Dictionary of Japanese Folklore*, *op. cit.*, pp. 671-672.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 672.

1. First, the classic approach historically started with studies conducted on the impact of bombing on European and Japanese cities<sup>13</sup>. Social scientists focused on an event as a catalyst with negative consequences that led to social disruption and a failure of the social system to ensure reasonable living conditions<sup>14</sup>. Disasters are «non-routine events»<sup>15</sup> that interrupt social stability, lead to physical damage, and are followed by a return to stability with some behaviour changes.
2. Second, influenced by geography and geophysics, the hazards-disaster tradition focused on cyclic events seen as a normal part of the environmental processes, such as earthquakes, tornadoes, or floods<sup>16</sup>. The issue is less the environmental threats and extreme events themselves than the human vulnerability and associated lack of preparedness. By this focus on vulnerability and resilience, the hazards-disaster tradition converges with the third approach that focuses on the social aspect of disasters.
3. For this third category of definitions, while natural events cause damages, disasters reflect the coping patterns of individuals and their social structure, in relation to their vulnerabilities, changes and resilience<sup>17</sup>. Disasters emerge from a «failure»<sup>18</sup> or a «collapse»<sup>19</sup> of the sociocultural system and protections. Vulnerability is latent *within* the social structure, and «disruption is the outcome of vulnerability», therefore the magnitude of a disaster is to be measured in terms of the «extent of the failure of the normative or cultural system», not in lives or property lost<sup>20</sup>.

In Japan, representations of disasters encompass two main perspectives. The first one reflects the scientific approach and offers a typology of disasters,

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<sup>13</sup> R. W. Perry, «What Is a Disaster», in H. Rogríguez, E. L. Quarantelli, R. R. Dynes (eds.), *Handbook of Disaster Research*, Springer, New York 2007, p. 5.

<sup>14</sup> C. E. Fritz, «Disaster», in R.K. Merton and R.A. Nisbet (eds.), *Contemporary Social Problems*, Harcourt, Brace and World, New York 1961, pp. 651-694.

<sup>15</sup> G. A. Kreps, «Disaster as systemic event and social catalyst: A clarification of subject matter», in E.L. Quarantelli (ed.), *What is a disaster: Perspectives on the question*, Routledge, New York and London 1998, p. 34.

<sup>16</sup> A. Oliver-Smith, «“What is a disaster?”: Anthropological Perspectives on a Persistent Question», in A. Oliver-Smith and S. M. Hoffman (eds.), *The Angry Earth: Disaster in Anthropological Perspective*, Routledge, New York 1999, pp. 18-34.

<sup>17</sup> E. L. Quarantelli, «A Social Science Research Agenda For The Disasters Of The 21st Century: Theoretical, Methodological And Empirical Issues And Their Professional Implementation», in R. W. Perry and E. L. Quarantelli (eds.), *What is a disaster: New answers to old questions*, Xlibris, Philadelphia 2005, p. 339.

<sup>18</sup> E.L. Bates, W. G. Peacock, *Living Conditions, Disasters, and Development: An Approach to Cross-Cultural Comparisons*, Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, Athens 1993, p. 13.

<sup>19</sup> W. R. Dombrowsky, «Another step toward a social theory of disaster», *Preliminary Paper # 70*, Disaster Research Center, University of Delaware, Newark (1981) and W. R. Dombrowsky, «Again and Again: Is a Disaster What We Call “Disaster”? Some Conceptual Notes on Conceptualizing the Object of Disaster Sociology», *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters*, 13, 3 (1995), pp. 241-254.

<sup>20</sup> Perry, «What Is a Disaster», *art. cit.*, p. 13.

from fires to nuclear disasters. This perspective is closely related to the first two definitions of disasters used in disaster management as mentioned above. The second perspective—which can be linked to the third definition of disasters used in disaster management—focuses on storytelling, in terms of individual life stories, as well as collective memory of a local community. Folkloric representations of disasters play three roles that concern the elucidation of what causes disasters, the way to prevent disasters and the way to respond to disasters.

Folkloric representations are rooted in Classical Japanese culture and are also linked to Chinese culture. Folkloric studies of disasters mention three main causes for such events: a god's punishment, the doing of an evil spirit, or the doing of a *Yōkai*<sup>21</sup>. To prevent disasters multiple ways are mentioned such as «magical rituals», «countering spells» and «spatial recognition» derived from Yin-Yang theories, Feng Shui theories and spiritual beliefs. The way to respond to disasters are mainly based on religious beliefs and procedures—among other prayers to protectors or to Buddha, and magical spells<sup>22</sup>.

A famous case of storytelling concerns the poet and politician of the Heian period Sugawara no Michizane (菅原道真, 845-903). Michizane's life and heritage were represented in various ways such as painted narrative handscroll. A famous example is *The Scroll on the Foundation of the Kitano Tenmangū Shrine* (*Kitano tenmangū engi emaki* 北野天満宮縁起絵巻). This creation appears, for instance, in Japanese history textbooks used in high school<sup>23</sup>. In other words, it is one of the elements that are encompassed in Japanese imagination of disasters.

Michizane was a successful politician reputed for both his knowledge and his talents as a scholar and as a poet. Serving the imperial family at the highest level, he was accused by a rival to plot against the current emperor. As a punishment, he was exiled from the imperial capital Kyōto and was sent to Kyūshū. Reportedly depressed because of this exile, he died two years later. After these events, a number of disasters and calamities occurred in Japan and were attributed to the angry spirit of Michizane. To calm the anger of this spirit many means had been used. For instance, Kitano Tenmangū Shrine was dedicated to Michizane and he was deified as *Tenjin* (天神, «Heavenly God»). Moreover, during a long time, rituals were conducted and fantasized biography of Michizane were sponsored like *The Scroll on the Foundation*

<sup>21</sup> The word *Yōkai* refers in Japanese folklore to some supernatural apparitions and to some spirits.

<sup>22</sup> These explanations are mainly based on the following paper: T. Sakurai, «The Folkloric Image of Disasters - From 'memory' to 'record', and to 'expression' 災害の民俗的イメージ—「記憶」から「記録」へ、そして「表現」へ—, *Historical disaster studies in Kyoto* 京都歴史災害研究, 3 (2005), pp., 1-20.

<sup>23</sup> Y. Arano, J. Itō, T. Katō, H. Shitara, I. Chiba, S. Murai, *High School - Japan history B* 高等学校日本史B, Shimizu Shoin, Tokyo 2020 (2013), p. 41.

of the *Kitano Tenmangū Shrine*<sup>24</sup> —this scroll is nowadays designated as «National Treasure». Some disasters occurring after the death of Michizane were told to be caused by his «anger» which, in turn, was used to justify political changes<sup>25</sup>. In this explanatory narrative —which is not specific to Japanese historical culture— the causes and consequences of disasters are intertwined with judgments regarding human actions.

Michizane's story, discussed in Japanese schools, reinforces the belief that Japan has a «culture of disaster» historically rooted. This expression of «culture of disaster» was also used by commentators regarding other «cultures», such as the Philippines<sup>26</sup> and Europe<sup>27</sup>. In Japan, such a narrative is also reflected in contemporary science fiction. For instance, the writer Komatsu Sakyō (小松左京, 1931-2011) is well known for his novel *Japan Sinks*<sup>28</sup>. This story is about the submersion of Japan due to earthquakes and, finally, the end of what we know as «Japan». Like many successful novels in Japan, this story was adapted into movies. *Japan Sinks* has been readapted for television in 2021 under the title *Japan Sinks - People of Hope (Nippon chinbotsu - kibō no hito 日本沈没—希望のひと)* and emphasizes on the respective role of researchers, politics, and state officials to face a disaster (or fail to do so).

In these stories, disasters do not simply appear because of an efficient cause. It is not simply the death of Michizane that is interpreted as the reason for disaster but even more the political unethical behaviours of his opponents that conducted Michizane into a forced exile. Then, disasters and calamities that follow Michizane's death are fundamentally considered as ethical and socio-political events. Similarly, in *Japan Sinks*, the tragedy of the story is not simply the disappearance of a whole nation or of a whole territory due to unavoidable geological events, but rather the social, political, and psychological difficulties to face a scientifically announced event which will lead to a disaster.

Today, the role of socio-political challenges in the framing of disasters is explicit on the international stage of high-level disaster governance, in which the Japanese Government plays a key role. Governments and international organizations often «mandate» a definition of disaster to define the boundaries of emergency management

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<sup>24</sup> S. Iwao, T. Iyanaga, S. Ishii, *et al.*, «Sugawara no Michizane (845-903)», *Dictionnaire historique du Japon*, 18 (1992), Lettre S (2), pp. 150-151 and H. Plutschow, «Ideology and Historiography: The Case of Sugawara no Michizane in the *Nihongiiryaku*, *Fusō Ryakki* and the *Gukanshō*», *Historiography and Japanese Consciousness of Values and Norms*, International Research Center for Japanese Studies (2003), pp. 133-145, DOI: <http://doi.org/10.15055/00001515>.

<sup>25</sup> Plutschow, «Ideology and Historiography: The Case of Sugawara no Michizane in the *Nihongiiryaku*, *Fusō Ryakki* and the *Gukanshō*», *art. cit.*, p. 141.

<sup>26</sup> G. Bankoff, *Cultures of Disaster: Society and Natural Hazard in the Philippines*, Routledge, London 2002.

<sup>27</sup> M. -H. Huet, *The Culture of Disaster*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2012.

<sup>28</sup> S. Komatsu, *Japan Sinks 日本沈没*, 2 vol., Kadokawa bunko, Tokyo 2020 (1973).

and response<sup>29</sup>, as well as prevention and mitigation. The United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNISDR) and co-signatory institutions note a shift from an approach in terms of humanitarian responses and relief efforts to be deployed *after* one-off events to the ‘preparedness saves lives’ approach involving economics and long-term building of resilience<sup>30</sup>. They insist on the links between disaster risk reduction and development, especially given that «vulnerability and exposure to disasters are increasing as more people and assets locate in areas of high risk»<sup>31</sup>. The main drivers of risks worldwide are climate change —weather-related hazards will increase in frequency and intensity—, poorly planned and managed urbanization, environmental degradation, poverty and weak governance<sup>32</sup>. The United Nations approach is now based on two axes: reducing disaster risks and building resilience.

In their Handbook on Disaster Management, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) defines disaster as an «event, natural or man-made, sudden or progressive, which impacts with such severity that the affected community has to respond by taking exceptional measures»<sup>33</sup>. Disasters are characterized by (1) disruption to normal patterns of life; (2) human loss of life, injury, hardship, and health issues; (3) effects on social structure (e.g. destruction of or damage to essential services); (4) community needs such as shelter, food, clothing, medical assistance, and social care. The wide field of disaster management spans across multiple fields and disciplines including legislation and policies, international disaster assistance, prevention, mitigation, preparedness, and response, logistic, recovery, training and public awareness, as well as post-disaster review and research.

Several high-level international disaster management governance mechanisms took the names of the Japanese cities where they have been drafted, which contributes to Japan’s international reputation regarding disaster management:

- The Yokohama Strategy adopted in 1994.
- The Hyogo Framework for Action (2005-2015) (A/CONF.206/6) that was adopted in 2005 addresses gaps identified in the Yokohama Strategy (A/CONF.206/L.1), including knowledge management and education, reducing underlying risk factors, and preparedness for effective response and recovery.

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<sup>29</sup> Perry, «What Is a Disaster», *art. cit.*, p. 2 and P. Buckle, «Mandated definitions, local knowledge and complexity», in R. W. Perry and E. L. Quarantelli (eds.), *What is a disaster: New answers to old questions*, Xlibris, Philadelphia 2005, pp. 173-200.

<sup>30</sup> UN System Task Team on the Post-2015 UN Development Agenda, *Disaster Risk and Resilience. Thematic Think Piece*, United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR), World Meteorological Organization 2012, p. 7.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>33</sup> W. N. Carter, *Disaster management: a disaster manager’s handbook*, Asian Development Bank, Mandaluyong City 2008, p. XIX.

- The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (2015–2030) that emphasizes resilience, «Building Back Better» in recovery, rehabilitation, reconstruction, as well as the intertwining between disaster risk reduction, climate change adaptation, and sustainable development.

Disaster management approaches in governance tend to focus on economic aspects, such as the losses of assets versus the losses of income, and the impact of disasters on prices, and to provide economic solutions, such as borrowing (e.g. World Bank Report). Many high-level strategies, for instance from the National Government in Japan, still rely on evacuating people «to save life», and then providing economic compensation<sup>34</sup>. Yet, such a practice clashes with local communities' attachment to their land, as money can hardly compensate for the symbolic and emotional values of houses as family heritage and field farmers dedicated their life to care. Besides, these «recovery» practices risk reinforcing existing vulnerabilities, since more privileged populations are better equipped to take advantage of government-sponsored recovery mechanisms and are more likely to have insurances<sup>35</sup>. This also conflicts with a view in terms of milieu or *fūdo*, which, as we will see, inextricably ties cultural practices, individual lifestyle, historical communal contexts and environmental realities.

### 3. The Idea of *Fūdo* 風土

The dichotomies culture-nature and human-nature, often associated with modern Western thought, have not been dominant in Japan until the influence of Western sciences; local pre-Meiji representation of «nature» remains in contemporary Japanese language and culture<sup>36</sup>. This difference in framing of the relation of human communities to the natural environment influences how disasters are conceptualized in Japan. As we will see, far from being purely natural, disasters have a human-made aspect and involve people's practices, storytelling, and imaginary<sup>37</sup>. To understand the conceptualizations and language of disaster in Japan, we need to take this cultural framing into account. The idea of *fūdo* captures this view in which human communities and their cultural practices are codependent to the place they live in.

<sup>34</sup> P. Jobin, «Fukushima en procès : un mouvement social dans les tribunaux pour repenser la catastrophe», *Ebisu* [En ligne], 58 (2021), DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ebisu.6118>.

<sup>35</sup> D. W. Cash, P. G. Belloy, «Salience, Credibility and Legitimacy in a Rapidly Shifting World of Knowledge and Action», *Sustainability*, 12, 7376 (2020), DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12187376>.

<sup>36</sup> L. Droz, R. Jannel, O. Komatsubara *et al.*, «Exploring the diversity of conceptualizations of nature in East and South-East Asia», *art. cit.*, and R. Jannel, «Vie de concepts: le vocabulaire philosophique au Japon». À *l'épreuve*, 2 (2015).

<sup>37</sup> H. Saito, «The imaginary and epistemology of disaster preparedness: The case of Japan's nuclear safety failure», *Poetics* (2021), DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2021.101594>.

The concept of *fūdo* —translated as «milieu» or «land»<sup>38</sup>— always involves people together with natural elements (such as climatic conditions, the characteristics of the land, other species), and their interrelations<sup>39</sup>.

The term of *fūdo* 風土 has a long history. It was first a Chinese word imported in Japan with numerous other aspects of Chinese culture<sup>40</sup>. The core meaning of the first Chinese character that composed this word (風) is «wind» and the core meaning of the second one (土) is «soil». In Japanese, the first character (風) can refer to dynamic phenomena such as the air and the atmosphere, but also to the manners and the ever-changing shape of things. By contrast, the second character (土) refers to static things such as «earth», «land», or to the «ground» of something. Berque explains:

In Japanese, «milieu» is called *fūdo* 風土. The first Chinese character means the wind, but also the customs which are our ways of living, speaking and acting. It is here in the position of the determinant. The second Chinese character signifies the Earth and is here in the position of the determined. This means that on the planet Earth, the human milieu necessarily comprises a substantial ground (*do* 土: the *hupokeimenon* S). Since we exist, the milieu necessarily includes a certain way (*fū* 風: the predicate P) in which the ground is determined by our thoughts, our words and our actions, in other words, by our customs; the «way» which, by the wind (風), participates in the sky's insubstantiality, *sora*, a word written as 空, the Chinese character that also translated the Sanskrit *śūnyatā*: Buddhist emptiness [...].<sup>41</sup>

In this explanation, he implicitly links the concept of *fūdo* to what he calls «trajection», namely «both the cosmicizing of the body and the somatizing of the

<sup>38</sup> Augustin Berque proposes to translate *fūdo* 風土 in French by «milieu» or «contrée» (land). In his French translation of Watsuji's *Fūdo. Anthropological consideration* 風土—人間学の考察, he finally prefers «milieu». His choice is guided by the difficulty to translate Watsuji's concept of *fūdosei* 風土性, which connotes the dynamic process that makes *fūdo* as a tierce element between the physical environment and both individuals and communities —an element that also aims to overcome subject-object dualism. Indeed, to render *fūdosei* 風土性 in French by «contréité» would be more disgraceful than translating it by «médiance». He thoroughly explains this choice in the preface of the French translation of Watsuji's *Fūdo. Anthropological consideration* 風土—人間学の考察. See: Watsuji, *Fūdo. Le milieu humain*, translated and introduced by Augustin Berque, CNRS Éditions, Paris 2011, pp. 14-21.

<sup>39</sup> The idea of interdependency or interrelations constitutes a usual conception in Asia notably rooted in Buddhist thought. See: R. Jannel, «Bouddhisme et causalité. Variation autour du concept de *pratityasamutpāda*», *L'enseignement philosophique*, 2022/3, pp. 33-43, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3917/eph.724.0033>.

<sup>40</sup> Y. Deguchi, «Foreword», in L. Droz, *The concept of milieu in environmental ethics: individual responsibility within an interconnected world*, Routledge, New York 2021, p. xiii.

<sup>41</sup> Berque, *Poetics of the Earth. Natural History and Human History, op. cit.*, p. 49.

world»<sup>42</sup>. These are, of course, Berque's own views. Nevertheless, this quote allows us to show that in the word *fūdo*, both elements —*fū* 風 and *do* 土— do not just constitute a superposition of two elements. They interact and contribute to the constitution of a milieu, which encompasses an ecological ground and diverse sociocultural elements.

The current meaning of the concept of *fūdo* is linked to the Japanese intellectual history of this word. The word *fūdo* 風土 is associated to the *Fudoki* 風土記 which refers to chronicles supposed to report, at the request of the Empress Genmei 元明 (661-721), history, customs, traditions, geography or even some of the myths and legends from different regions. Today, the word *fūdo* 風土 remains associated with traditional ways of life and way of thinking. Another key historical development of the concept was the contribution of the philosopher Watsuji Tetsurō (和辻哲郎, 1889-1960) in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Watsuji uses the concept of *fūdo* 風土 in many writings, and especially in two works:

- *The Fūdo —anthropological considerations (Fūdo—Ningengakuteki kōsatsu* 風土—人間学の考察), published in 1935 in one book after having been published by parts in journals.
- *Ethics (Rinrigaku* 倫理学), a study initially published in three books in 1937, 1942 and 1949 —which constitutes his *magnum opus*.

In *Ethics*, Watsuji discusses the «historical and medial structure of human beings» (*ningen sonzai no rekishi-teki fūdo-teki kōzō* 人間存在の歴史的風土の構造, Watsuji 2007, p. 105). According to him, humans are fundamentally historical and medial beings. History and milieus are in a constant development, intertwined with individuals as well as with the society. Watsuji understands human beings (*ningen* 人間) as composed of two dimensions: the human individual (*hito* 人) and the nexus of relationships between individual that Watsuji calls *aidagara* 間柄 («betweenness»)<sup>43</sup>. This *aidagara* takes place in a particular land or «milieu» (*fūdo*) and has for provenance a certain history.

Furthermore, Watsuji explicitly distinguishes on the one hand «historicity» (*rekishisei* 歴史性) from «temporality» (*jikansei* 時間性)<sup>44</sup> and, on the other hand,

<sup>42</sup> *Idem.*, p. 56. Berque also explains this neologism as such: «The term *trajection* comes from *trans* (beyond, through) and *jacere* (to throw). It is literally the idea of «throwing oneself» beyond identity, and especially to cross the limit between subject and object, the subject and his/her environment. As we will see, it is also linked to the idea of going beyond the identity of a given state, hence the idea of history and evolution.» See: *Idem.*, p. 37, note 16.

<sup>43</sup> The Japanese word *aidagara* 間柄 barely means in Watsuji's philosophy «social intertwinement» and can be brought closer to the idea of «social body».

<sup>44</sup> T. Watsuji, *Ethics* 倫理学, 4 vol., Iwanami bunko, Tokyo 2007, vol. 3, p. 227.

«mediance» (*fūdosei* 風土性) from «spatiality» (*kūkansei* 空間性)<sup>45</sup>. Even if human beings are spatio-temporally situated, it does not mean that human beings are concretely experiencing space-time as it is. Human existence is grounded on space and time, but the concrete human experiences take place, according to Watsuji, in a continuum made of «historicity» and «mediance».

#### 4. Disasters within the framework of the milieu

The literature on *fūdo* tends to work with general terms and to describe how «humanity» or a «nation» develops its identity attached to the land. The process of identification to a place of a specific group involves political aspects. The concept of *fūdo* as well as the authors engaging with it have been criticized for supporting nationalist and identity rhetoric<sup>46</sup>. For instance, while Watsuji insists on the dynamicity of the relations between humans and the milieu and rejects natural determinism, he appears to assume that cultures are directly tied to bounded communities anchored in a particular land<sup>47</sup>. Along with the absence of analysis of the internal dynamics of oppression *within* communities, this slippery slope of nationalism or essentialism constitute important limitations. As we will see in section 5, this slippery slope can also be found in rhetorical tendencies in some discourses that attempt to make sense of disasters as events that ground the political identity of a community, sometimes against other groups.

To address these limitations, we propose to use the framework of the milieu (Figure 1) that distinguishes between the individuals, their communities, and sketches how they relate to each other and with the milieu. Following Berque, the milieu is understood as having two sides: the milieu as a matrix that shapes the individuals living within it; and the milieu as an imprint left by people in the place—which also influenced individuals. We propose to apply this framework to disasters (Figure 1) developed by Droz<sup>48</sup> and inspired by Watsuji's and Berque's work<sup>49</sup>. Through daily practices, each individual leaves traces on the milieu; an imprint. The individual imprints of the members of the

<sup>45</sup> See for instance p. 232.

<sup>46</sup> K. Nakashima, «Nationalizing Nature: Discourses of “Fudo” and National Environmentalism in Modern Japan», *Kanazawa daigaku bungakubu chirigaku hōkoku*, 10 (2002), pp. 115-126.

<sup>47</sup> Watsuji describes three types of climates—which are monsoon, desert, and meadow—and assumes a form of determinism that understands cultural specificities as a result of the climatic environment. For critics of such contradictory aspects of Watsuji's philosophy see: L. Droz, *The concept of milieu in environmental ethics: individual responsibility within an interconnected world*, Routledge, New York 2021.

<sup>48</sup> Droz, *The concept of milieu in environmental ethics: individual responsibility within an interconnected world*, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

<sup>49</sup> We already mentioned his study published in French in 2014 and entitled in English *Poetics of the Earth. Natural History and Human History*. The French-speaking readers can also consult the following book: A. Berque, *Recouvrance. Retour à la terre et cosmicité en Asie orientale*, Éditions Éoliennes, Bastia 2022, for instance pp. 47-49.

community —which can include non-human beings— are intertwined, sometimes mutually reinforcing and at times conflicting. These processes shape the milieu as a matrix, which, in turn, influences the individual, his worldview and practices. This framework of the milieu distinguishes clearly between the role of the individual, and the role of the community, such as the pressures of the social structure<sup>50</sup>. In this view, the four aspects of the framework are mutually co-constitutive and together constitute the frame of the world: the milieu. This framework resists social and natural determinism, as each individual retains the agency to make choices that will contribute to shaping the milieu. Such an idea of milieu reflects the «subjectivation of environment» and the «environmentalization of the subject»<sup>51</sup>.

Based on this framework, we propose to see disasters as a phenomenon of the milieu, which emerges from the co-constitutive relations between the perspective of individuals, communities, and the local environment. This implies a view of disasters as more than «objective» spatiotemporal events, and instead urges us to take into consideration the sociocultural webs of meanings as well as the individual experiences and life trajectories.

Figure 1: Disaster and the conceptual framework of the milieu<sup>52</sup>.



<sup>50</sup> S. Haslanger, «Distinguished Lecture: Social Structure, Narrative and Explanation», *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 45, 1 (2015), pp. 1-15, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00455091.2015.1019176>.

<sup>51</sup> This expression is central in Imanishi Kinji's (1902-1992) work on «The World of Living Beings» (*Seibutsu no sekai* 生物の世界). See for instance: L. Droz, R. Jannel, C. Rupprecht, «Living Through Multispecies Societies: Approaching the Microbiome with Imanishi Kinji», *Endeavour*, 46 (2022), DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.endeavour.2022.100814>.

<sup>52</sup> Adapted from: Droz, *The concept of milieu in environmental ethics: individual responsibility within an interconnected world*, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

The four aspects of the framework of the milieu are affected by a disaster:

- *Community*. Disasters often make apparent the need for community collaboration and coordination. In the face of a deeply disruptive and directly dangerous event such as disaster, people *need* to get together to restore their milieu (for instance, infrastructure, housing, shelter). Disasters are *shared*; they are not concerning only an individual life, but a community or region, which gives the opportunity to the affected group of people to (re)weave community bounds to survive and rebuild.
- *Milieu as matrix*. Disasters such as earthquakes touch not just a place, but a milieu where people are, for instance, living and cooking. It touches on what the people can do within the space they lived in, and how they can see and project themselves on this milieu as a stage and supportive foundation for their life. This aspect includes not only the physical damages, but also the changes in the socio-political context and the rhetoric that follow disasters.
- *Individual as agent*. Disasters are events that directly disrupt the life and livelihood of affected individuals. People experience the disaster, and this experience can deeply change them as well as their view of themselves and the world. People must act urgently during the disaster and change their habits as well in the aftermath of the disaster.
- *Milieu as imprint*. Disasters influence the types of imprints that people leave on the milieu, be it directly—in the recovery process and reconstruction of the damaged infrastructure in a different way—or indirectly, for instance with the introduction of disaster-preparedness practices in daily life.

In the framework, the temporality of disasters is reflected on the matrix side, which is shaped historically throughout generations and affects the life trajectories. The type of temporality of disasters influences the narrative and socio-political responses. Despite the fictional stories of exceptional disasters, disasters tend *not* to be isolated events and *not* unpredictable. As we have seen, disaster management has shifted from a view in terms of isolated events, to an approach that takes disasters as always potentially happening, which urges for preparation. The temporality of disasters is sometimes represented as a cycle in which existing vulnerabilities related to the potentiality of a disastrous event are composing disaster risk. After the occurrence of a disastrous event, damages—often conceptualized as mainly human and economic, but which can include environmental and ecological damages—add up to the previously existing vulnerabilities.

Moreover, rapid-onset disasters (such as typhoons) can be distinguished from

slow-onset disasters (for instance, droughts)<sup>53</sup>. The line between preparedness and recovery is sometimes blurred, and we can expect this line to become increasingly unclear in the context of climate change that exacerbates extreme weather events and creates havoc in climatic patterns. A concrete example of how disaster-preparedness practices turn into habits at the individual level is the earthquake emergency kit that is highly recommended by authorities for every household in Japan. This emergency kit includes non-perishable food and water that need to be regularly renewed. Along with drills, the maintenance of an emergency kit incorporates the possibility of disasters in daily habits. At the community level, communities celebrate traditional festivals (*matsuri* 祭り) that are related to seasonal activities (such as harvests), but also to disasters, involving gods and protectors for disaster prevention and participating in the protection of the souls of the deceased as well as to the collective resilience.

The spatiality of disasters is represented in the framework of the milieu on the side of the imprint, from localities to globality (in the bottom left in Figure 1). The concept of milieu is especially relevant to approach disasters precisely because disasters are usually *not global*<sup>54</sup>. For instance, the 1923 Great Kantō earthquake was a huge disaster, precisely because of the space and time of occurrence. A violent earthquake struck on 1 September 1923 at 11:58:44 JST, deep beneath Izu Ōshima Island in Sagami Bay (magnitude of 7.9). The earthquake occurred in one of the world's highest populated areas (Kantō area) at the time, and precisely when people were cooking, which led to widespread fires<sup>55</sup>. Disasters directly affect specific local communities, even though the socio-political impacts of the disasters span beyond the local area, to the national scope up to the global scale. Local, national and international perceptions of a specific disaster can greatly differ in terms of discourses, emotional experience and actions. Emotional resilience is not just a reflection of the importance of the disaster in terms of the number of deaths and material destruction.

<sup>53</sup> R. Hill, E. Skoufias, B. Maher, *The Chronology of a Disaster. A review and assessment of the value of acting early on household welfare*, World Bank Group, Washington 2019.

<sup>54</sup> Although some researchers refer to the COVID19 pandemic as a «global disaster». See for instance: Z. Wang, Y. Tao, «Many Nationalisms, One Disaster: Categories, Attitudes and Evolution of Chinese Nationalism on Social Media during the COVID -19 Pandemic», *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, 26, 525–548 (2021), DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11366-021-09728-5>

<sup>55</sup> About this disaster and some of its consequences, see for instance: I. Kitahara, «The Great Kantō Earthquake disaster and the people» 関東大震災と民衆, in T. Yamaguchi and T. Fuke, *Lectures on the History of Ideas – Taishō volume* 思想史講義【大正篇】, Chikuma shinsho, Tokyo 2022, pp. 273-288.

## 5. The Essentialist Temptation

The experience and narrative of disasters are closely intertwined with strong emotions and tied to personal and collective vulnerability and distress. Facing a disruptive event such as a local disaster, a community might need to reinvent the practices and perception of their milieu and identity. Disasters (both in terms of imagination and in terms of traumatic past events) inspire fear and grief, and lead to a need for individual humans to give meaning to the event, and to feel «safer» through connectedness to the community and other humans. In the wake of disasters, individuals resort to different ways of coping from fatalistic passivity and scapegoating to responsible collaborative actions, volunteering, to the development of preventive measures. Fatalistic attitudes tied to the belief that disasters are beyond control discourage people from making any attempts to improve their situation<sup>56</sup>.

The fact that the idea of disaster is intertwined with deeply emotional aspects makes it prone to be instrumentalized politically for other ends than disaster-related motives such as disaster prevention and resilience. When a large-scale disaster strikes in a region, it also drives attention from the national or international level and triggers the need for narratives to help societies make sense of the loss and damages, as well as what happens next. These narratives and discourses are political, especially as politicians and decision makers locally, nationally, and internationally are expected to make statements and decisions to support the recovery process.

There are two sides of the political dynamics of narratives related to disasters: an outwards perspective and an inwards perspective. First, an outwards-looking perspective can use disaster management and the successful recovery process as a tool for international soft power through disaster diplomacy<sup>57</sup>. This can be reinforced by orientalism, especially in the case of Japan's reputation in «Western» countries, which Japan has acquired through, for instance, international frameworks for disaster management. From the perspective of the individual, the scale of the relevant community to identify oneself with in case of disaster is often strongly influenced by the narrative *and* the origin of the external aid: Is support coming from within the local community, neighbouring communities, the regional or national governments and, among others, international aid? Disrupted by a disaster, local communities are particularly vulnerable, not only to physical distress (such as the needs for water, shelter), but also to socio-political interventions that can have imperialist traces, as the physical vulnerabilities sometimes serve as justification for intervention by previously unwelcomed external actors to «help». Different institutions compete for the control

<sup>56</sup> S. Hansson, K. Orru, A. Siibak, *et al.*, «Communication-related vulnerability to disasters: A heuristic framework», *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, 51 (2020), DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijdrr.2020.101931> and G. Johannesdottir, G. Gíslad'ottir, «People living under threat of volcanic hazard in southern Iceland: vulnerability and risk perception», *Nat. Hazards Earth Syst. Sci.*, 10, 2 (2010), pp. 407-420.

<sup>57</sup> R. J. Samuels, *3.11: Disaster and Change in Japan*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 2013, p. 73.

of the narratives during and after disasters. Who is legitimate to explain the events? Meaning-giving entities include religious authorities and governmental narratives. Sciences tend to play a limited role today in the interpretation of «disasters», perhaps because while a scientific explanation helps to describe the efficient causes of a disaster, it falls short from addressing the key challenge of emotional resilience and coping.

Second, an inward-looking perspective tends to strengthen national or regional identity. After a disaster, some might succumb to the essentialist temptation to narrate the recovery process as emerging from a reconnection to a collective identity, through a deep marking of the group's borders, as well as an exclusion of foreign elements and of practices rumoured to have contributed to causing the disaster. In Japan, disasters are often followed by widespread rumours that accuse Koreans of criminal activities such as setting fires to buildings. The episode of the 1923 Kantō Massacre marked Japanese history. In the three weeks following the Great Kantō Earthquake of 1/9/1923, an estimated 6000 ethnic Koreans and Japanese opposition members were massacred by soldiers of the Imperial Japanese Army, police and vigilantes in Yokohama<sup>58</sup>.

This inward-looking perspective relates to disaster nationalism<sup>59</sup> and ambivalent disaster identity politics that praise the resilience of some while vilifying others<sup>60</sup>. This ambivalence is virulent in traditional media as well as on social media. In July 2011, four months after the Great East Japan Earthquake, the Japan Times published a commentary titled «The Risks of Disaster Nationalism». Research beyond the Japanese case has also shown that crisis can lead to increased hate speech, namely, «insulting, blaming or discriminating individuals or groups for their backgrounds, beliefs, or ideas»<sup>61</sup>. In recent years, the phenomenon of post-disaster hate speech has seized social media, although social media are also one of the main sources of information in case of disaster, with positive movement of support and collaboration<sup>62</sup>. The desperate quest for answers of a population confronted with tragedy can be manipulated to serve divergent political views. Richard Samuels describes the dynamics of the redefinition of political identity in the aftermath of the

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<sup>58</sup> K. Hasegawa, «The Massacre of Koreans in Yokohama in the Aftermath of the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923», *Monumenta Nipponica*, 75, 1 (2020), pp. 91-122, DOI: doi:10.1353/mni.2020.0002 and S. Ryang, «The Great Kanto Earthquake and the Massacre of Koreans in 1923: Notes on Japan's Modern National Sovereignty», *Anthropological Quarterly*, 76, 4 (2003), pp. 731-748.

<sup>59</sup> H. Eda, «Disaster Justice: Mobilizing Grassroots Knowledge Against Disaster Nationalism in Japan», in A. J. Jolivet (ed.). 2015. *Research Justice: Methodologies for Social Change*, Policy Press, Bristol, 2015, pp. 95-108.

<sup>60</sup> Such a question is related to the so-called «nippology» (*nihonjinron*). For a critic of the link between national identity and disaster in Japan see, for instance: M. Gaulène, *Fukushima: un accident «Made in Japan»? Analyse sémiotique de la causalité au Japon*, Université PSL – MINES ParisTech, 21 April 2021, in particular pp. 18-21.

<sup>61</sup> Hansson, Orru, Siibak, Bäck, Krüger, Gabel, Morsut, «Communication-related vulnerability to disasters: A heuristic framework», *art. cit.*, p. 6, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijdr.2020.101931>.

<sup>62</sup> B. Peary, R. Shaw, Y. Takeuchi, «Utilization of Social Media in the East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami and Its Effectiveness», *Journal of Natural Disaster Science*, 34 (2012), pp. 3-18, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2328/jnds.34.3>.

## Great Eastern Japan Disaster:

After the disaster struck, elites began to refashion their arguments, incorporating lessons from 3.11 that bolstered their particular cause. The national conversation became a rhetoric of crisis and took on greater urgency. [...] Still others declared that 3.11 taught the clear lesson that Japan must return to an idealized past and rebuild what had been lost to modernity and globalization. Japan's interests could be realized only by returning to the country's basic values and rediscovering its essential identity.<sup>63</sup>

These dynamics are also at play *within* the state and can lead to the characterization of different communities in essentialist terms. For instance, after 3.11, the people from the affected area —Tohoku— were «widely admired —almost to the point of essentialist caricature— for their patient and persevering nature (*gaman zuyoi* 我慢強<sup>い</sup>) and for their acceptance of what had befallen them»<sup>64</sup>. In the discourses of essentialism, a specific group is bound to a series of characteristics and a particular milieu *by essence*. This can be through self-identification of an individual or a group to a specific milieu or narrative, or they can be attributed to this narrative by external discourses just by virtue of being part of a group. When intertwined with nationalism, essentialism renders the implementation of stronger measures by the state more acceptable by anchoring them into the identity and exceptionality of a defined group.

This «positive» side of the coin of essentialism also has a darker side, expressed as nationalism, racism, and hate speech against vulnerable communities. Shaw analysed how nativist organizations in Japan took advantage of the political and social instability that followed 3/11/2011 and capitalized on disasters to «repeatedly attack both racial/ethnic minorities but also progressive activists themselves»<sup>65</sup>. While hate speech groups such as *Zaitokukai*<sup>66</sup> date from far before 2011, their presence strikingly rose in the aftermath of 3/11/2011. A 2016 report by the Ministry of Justice counted 1,152 hate speech rallies between April 2012 and September 2015<sup>67</sup>. Shaw describes

<sup>63</sup> Samuels, *3.11: Disaster and Change in Japan*, *op. cit.*, p. x-xi.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>65</sup> V. G. Shaw, *Post-disaster Citizenship: The Politics of Race, Belonging, and Activism after Fukushima*, The University of Texas at Austin, Austin 2018, p. 15.

<sup>66</sup> The *Zaitokukai* 在特会 is an ultra-nationalist and xenophobic ideological organization engaging in discriminatory activities against ethnic Koreans citizens or residents of Japan. It is considered by the National Police Agency as a potential threat to public order. See: J. McCurry, «Police in Japan place anti-Zainichi Korean extremist group Zaitokukai on watchlist», *The Guardian*, 4th December 2014, consulted on 29 June 2022.

<sup>67</sup> Center for Human Rights Education and Training, *Survey report concerning the actual situation of hate speech* ヘイトスピーチに関する実態調査報告書, Ministry of Justice 法務省, Tokyo 2016, p. 33. and Shaw, *Post-disaster Citizenship: The Politics of Race, Belonging, and Activism after Fukushima*, *op. cit.*, p. 214.

the clear link, in Japan, between identity politics and disaster narratives:

Disaster is especially important, [...] because it has historically troubled the boundaries of whom is included in or excluded from the nation [...]. Whereas, previous disasters had solidified a myth of a monoethnic nation, with the exception of the Kobe earthquake, the new nation after 3/11 seems to look past the criteria of ethnic and cultural similarity as the basis for social belonging<sup>68</sup>.

On a hopeful note, Shaw argues that in response to the surge in hate speech and discrimination, Japanese anti-racism activists who «initially acting out of a localized sense of the temporality of crisis and urgency eventually began probing into the structural conditions of racism»<sup>69</sup>. Nevertheless, after the 16/4/2016 Kumamoto earthquake, there was —again— a surge of explicit messages posted on social media painting Koreans as the culprits behind disasters, following the same patterns as the 1923 Kantō earthquake<sup>70</sup>. These views were also relayed by some politicians as well as in protests and hate speech marches. In the following month, in order to comply with the United Nation's *International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination*, Japan's National Diet enacted the *Hate Speech Act* on 25/5/2016, but stopped short of establishing a penalty for committing hateful act or speech.

Post-disaster nationalist discourses tend to privilege one specific community that is often essentialized and idealized at the expenses of other groups. Post-disaster essentialism and nationalism feed on a discrepancy between the realities of who inhabits the milieu and the representation of the community as, for instance, exclusively composed of ethnic Japanese. Disasters trigger the need for individuals to redefine the community to which they identify and with whom they decide to collaborate in the recovery processes. If they recognize as legitimate a community that excludes diverse groups and people who share the milieu, their representation clashes with reality on the ground. This can lead to emotional reactions of fear and hate against excluded groups «that should not be there», and even to practices and actions that aim at physically excluding those groups to restore the adequacy between the nationalist representation of the community and the reality.

In other words, nationalist discourses tend to overestimate some elements of the framework of the milieu. Reversely, applying the framework and refraining from overestimating any of the four elements could contribute to reducing the risks

<sup>68</sup> Shaw, *Post-disaster Citizenship: The Politics of Race, Belonging, and Activism after Fukushima*, *op. cit.*, p. 113.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>70</sup> Ryang, «The Great Kanto Earthquake and the Massacre of Koreans in 1923: Notes on Japan's Modern National Sovereignty», *art. cit.*, pp. 731-748. and Shaw, *Post-disaster Citizenship: The Politics of Race, Belonging, and Activism after Fukushima*, *op. cit.*, p. 197.

of extreme and threatening individual or collective behaviours. By distinguishing between the individual and the community within a milieu, the framework of the milieu helps to shed lights on the inadequacies in the representation of the community and of the milieu that lead to the essentialist temptation. The framework forces to balance the importance and attention given to each of its four aspects in the narratives and representations of the disaster:

- *The communities involved*: the role of each of the communities involved (respectively, the local affected community, the international community that provides aid, among others).
- *The disruption of the milieu as matrix*: the emotional and sociocultural burden that represents the loss of the local habitat and landscape as well as the impact on local common imaginaries.
- *The impacts on individual life*: the toll disasters take on individual life trajectories and the urgent psychological needs for healing, which can push some to look for answers in extreme narratives of fear and hatred.
- *The post-disaster imprints on the milieu*: the process of collective mourning that needs to unfold alongside the reconstruction measures and the hopes that they represent.

Keeping in mind that the four codependent aspects of the framework constitute elements of the same reality could contribute to changing the discourses and reducing the risks of falling in the slippery slope of nationalism.

## Conclusion

In a world facing the escalating effects of climate change and environmental degradation due to human activities, the practices, policies and conceptualizations of disasters are increasingly put at the centre of the debate. Climate change is one of the main drivers of disaster risks worldwide, along with environmental degradation —such as land degradation that makes areas more vulnerable to landslides and less resilient to changes, poorly planned urbanization, poverty, and weak governance. Extreme weather events from typhoons to heat waves and droughts are increasing in frequency and intensity, blurring the line between disaster preparedness and recovery.

What is a disaster? There exist different hermeneutic levels used to approach this question. Disaster management tends to approach disasters from an institutional large-scale perspective that tends to limit the relevant causes and effects to be considered to material and institutional factors. Given the cruciality of sociocultural and political representations of disasters tied to identity politics, and the increasing frequency and intensity of disasters, a long-term, local people-focused and culturally sensitive

perspective on disasters might be better in the climate change era. This perspective could benefit from taking into consideration local worldviews, including beliefs that are not grounded on natural sciences. Simultaneously, due to the emotional components of disaster representations and their propensity to be appropriated by various actors to promote their political, religious and economic interests, utmost care is needed when including these beliefs that are not evidence-based.

We showed that disasters are phenomena of the milieu that can hardly be separated from the sociocultural, historical, political, and ecological context in which they unfold. Individuals experience disasters as deeply emotional and disruptive, at times even life changing. Disasters might force them or inspire them to change practices, be it throughout the recovery process or by the introduction of disaster-preparedness practices in daily life. Doing so, they change the imprints that they leave on and reshape the milieu. The threat to life and livelihood as well as the emotional distress that disasters represent also heighten the need for community support. Disasters are shared, which raises the opportunity or challenge to (re)weave community bounds to survive and rebuild. In this process of participatory sense-making, the socio-political relations within the communities are redrawn, often creating warm bonds of mutual assistance, and sometimes revealing darker sides of discriminatory practices. In the case of Japan, political debates rage at the heart of the representations of disasters, which are appropriated by diverse groups in narratives that support their interests, including nationalist rhetoric.

These considerations regarding cultural representations anchored in the local milieu and influenced by the historical backgrounds are relevant beyond the Japanese case. They inspire us to rethink the temporality and spatiality of disasters, joining the third category of definitions of disasters —the most recent— that focus on the coping patterns of individuals and their social structure. In place of an event-centred temporality, we shift towards a continuous temporality composed of daily disaster-preparedness practices that become habits and key parts of the identity of the cultural community and the individuals, such as the maintenance of earthquake emergency kits in Japan. The increase in frequency and intensity of disasters linked to climate change might drive this shift regardless of the institutional rigidities. Instead of a large-scale impersonal approach to the spatiality of disasters influenced by international politics and governmental mechanisms, we move down scales to local beliefs and practices at the local scale of the milieu.

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