

Older People in Natural Disasters. By Junko OTANI. Kyoto: Kyoto University Press, and Victoria, Australia: Trans Pacific Press. 2010. 262 pp.

Reviewed by THANG Leng Leng

In recent decades, where rapid demographic transition coupled with social transformations and weakening family ties have already brought to the surface the vulnerabilities of old age in Japanese society, the incidences of natural disasters only serve to further expose the dilemma of this vulnerable segment of the society. Immediately after a disaster, the plight of the vulnerable population—including orphans, the disabled and older people—are often the focus of the media. However, such attention usually fails to sustain beyond the immediate post-disaster emergency period. What happens to the victims beyond the immediate post-disaster relief period? What types of long term support are needed to help the survivors return to a normal life?

“Older People in Natural Disasters” by Junko Otani is an insightful contribution to ending the dearth of knowledge of the long-term social effects of a disaster on survivors, which rarely focuses on the vulnerable population of older people. The book explores the long-term process of disaster recovery and rebuilding, and specifically focuses on the resettlement of the vulnerable elderly survivors in the aftermath of the Great Hanshin Earthquake, which hit Kobe city in Japan and its surrounding areas on January 17, 1995. Measuring 7.2 on the Richter scale, it was one of the most devastating earthquakes in the recent history of Japan because it had occurred in a densely populated area, resulting in the loss of 6,400 lives and the destruction of 400,000 homes. In this study, the vulnerable older people who lost their homes were found to be typically from the less affluent part of downtown Kobe, where many were living in old wooden pre-war houses which had yet to be renovated and were susceptible to fires and earthquake tremors. Otani found them to be among the most deprived as many were already isolated from their family and suffering from poverty. This book details the process of resettlement of this displaced population into the two types of post-earthquake public housing schemes—TSH (temporary shelter housing) and PRH (public reconstruction housing)—and the issues they faced in the process of community reconstruction.

The book begins with a concise background discussion of Japan’s aging demographic trends, social changes and policy responses. In

Chapter 2, Otani first provides a survey of the literature on natural disasters while investigating the gap of knowledge in understanding the long term effects of disasters. She also highlights the need for a gendered perspective in studying the problems of older people and identifies the research gap in the influence of the media on social policy making. In emphasizing the contextual and cultural specificity of the study, the review further differentiates the Kobe experience in terms of the isolation faced by older people from those who were affected by the 1995 Chicago heat wave as studied by Klinenberg.

Chapters 3 and 4 on methodology discusses in detail the quantitative and qualitative approaches adopted in the study, including discourse analysis of media data, secondary analysis of the Hyogo public health surveys (1996–1998) and ethnographic research in TSH and PRH communities. On the whole, qualitative data dominates the analysis, where case studies of media reports, public surveys, ethnography, participant observation and interviews combine to provide an in depth study that considers the specific socio-cultural characteristics of Japanese society. A section titled “characteristics of the researcher” further reminds researchers conducting fieldwork to be aware of the subjectivity of a researcher and the need for gender and cultural sensitivity in research.

The detailed ethnographic description of TSH (one-floor apartments with one building consisting of five to ten one- or two-room type units) and PRH (modern high rise apartment buildings) in Chapters 5 and 6, accompanied with visual illustrations, give depth to the understanding of the environment, the daily lives of the residents, the activities and the various actors (the government/public administration [*gyōsei*], care staff, community leaders [e.g. *minsei-in*], volunteers etc.) that intersect to mould the experiences of older residents.

A major strength of the book is the cross-engagements of a rich array of data throughout the book that shed light on how the media, the government and the community actively influence each other and the survivors in their long-term post-earthquake recovery. Otani recognizes that the media can be biased at times and tends to be sensational. However, she also notes the importance of media as an effective voice in criticizing *gyōsei* which over time has led to positive changes in the government to better support the older residents.

The phenomenon of loneliness and the related media buzzword of *kodokushi* (“dying alone”) addressed in the study are identified as important

challenges facing older residents. Otani explores the socio-cultural meanings of these concepts and how expectations of the family as the nexus of support have changed in reality, yet remain pertinent to Japanese values. This is illustrated by the negative notions of living alone and the cultural undesirability of dying alone in the absence of family.

Otani demonstrates how loneliness can become manifest in different forms for the residents in TSH and PRH, even though they share similar experiences in facing post-disaster loss. It is paradoxical that despite moving to a better, more modern living environment in PRH, some older people feel lonelier, in contrast to the sense of community felt by TSH residents. But instead of agreeing with the media, which blames the failure of the government for the less-than-optimal mental health of many older people, Otani suggests that the problem lies in the difficulties of making friends (especially for older men) in a new unfamiliar environment. Although she recognizes that high-rise apartment design may be one barrier to developing relationships, she attempts to provide a balanced view by recognizing the government's efforts in post-disaster reconstruction and expounding on how keywords, such as *kokoro no 'care'* (emotional care) and *tsunagari* (being related to someone), and new earthquake vocabularies, such as *renkei* (coordinated collaboration) and *fureai* (making friends), guided post-disaster policy and community efforts. She illustrates with case studies the importance of leadership, gender roles, the mobilization of existing resources (such as adapting the traditional *minsei-in* system to the new community initiatives), and working together with public health interventions as key factors towards sustainable community development. With Otani's reference to the post-earthquake construction of Kobe and its efforts at community development as a model of Japanese society, it would have been useful for the text to provide more cases discussing the agency of older people, such as the cases of older victims-turned volunteers and activists found in the literature on senior volunteerism in post-earthquake Kobe. This would have strengthened the book's focus on community regeneration and community action.

Overall, Otani's work represents a remarkable attempt in cross-disciplinary scholarship. It contributes to the increasing emphasis on loneliness and health care, as well as the provision of housing for older people in gerontology. It provides insightful guidance for post-disaster long-term recovery management of a vulnerable population and is especially timely in view of the elderly who have been left alone and

isolated after the recent devastating earthquakes in Japan and China. Using a socio-cultural perspective to understand how a society and its people respond to disaster and the vulnerability of old age, the book also serves to deepen our knowledge of contemporary Japanese society and culture.

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Pop Culture and the Everyday in Japan: Sociological Perspectives. Edited by Katsuya MINAMIDA and Izumi TSUJI. Translated by Leonie R. STICKLAND. Melbourne: Trans Pacific Press. 2012. 295 pp.

Reviewed by Gordon MATHEWS

Trans Pacific Press has been providing, in recent years, a welcome stream of translations of Japanese anthropological and sociological books, enabling these books to gain a readership beyond those scholars who read Japanese. The book under review definitely deserves such readership. English-language ethnographies of Japanese popular culture typically focus on one particular aspect of popular culture, whether TV dramas, or different genres of music or *manga*; but aside from these deep but narrow investigations, there are broader questions that the more casual student of Japanese popular culture may ask. How has the style of television viewing in Japan changed over the past fifty years? Why do so many young Japanese fall in love with fictional cartoon characters? Are today's young people more nationalistic than their grandparents? This book's chapters address questions such as these.

Like many Japanese social science books, the 2008 Japanese edition of this book was written for an audience broader than that of scholars alone. Thus it is largely free of the jargon that bedevils much Western social scientific writing. But this approach means that the editors must spend the first 80 pages of the book introducing cultural sociology (Minamida and I. Tsuji) and its methods for analyzing media and group culture (I. Tsuji), expressive culture (Minamida), and generations and the lifecourse (D. Tsuji) to an audience that may not understand these academic approaches. These essays may, in their sociology-based

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