



Peter Wynn Kirby. *Troubled Natures: Waste, Environment, Japan*

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THE COVER of this book—a visually stunning photograph of mountains and a lake in Hokkaido with the inscription “in our town we do not need organized crime”—reminds me of the cover of the fourth edition of Ruth BENEDICT’s *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (1970)—a Japanese sword stubbed onto a beautiful yellow chrysanthemum flower. By choosing such a cover, Kirby, like Benedict, seems to suggest the existence of “disjunction” that he believes is inherent in Japanese culture between the “tableaux of paper houses, manicured gardens, miniature bonsai trees, and other ready images of natural-cultural engagement” on one hand, and the “images of depleted Southeast Asian rainforests, slaughtered whales, and exported or outsourced pollution” on the other (10). Based on long-term (1998–2009) ethnographic research in the communities of Izawa and Horiuchi in Tokyo’s Azuma ward, Kirby stubs his own sword onto this disjunction. Yet he does not simply remain within the boundary of Azuma ward, where the residents suffered from water and air pollution originating in the waste transfer facility built within the ward and in the incinerators built in the neighboring prefecture of Saitama. Instead, he links his field sites to larger processes elsewhere and deals with incredibly diverse issues that Japan has faced since the late 1990s. Such issues include “uneasy relations between animals and humans, ‘native’ conceptions of the foreign and the polluted, selective and labile environmental priorities, reproductive challenges in the face of a plunging fertility rate, and changing attitudes to illness and health” (20). Furthermore, Kirby’s discussion of all these topics goes with his “analysis of ideas of *nature* in Japan and their influence on identity, anxiety, and action there” (9, emphasis mine). *Troubled Natures* is indeed an ambitious project, and because it is so ambitious, the book comes with its problems. In the next paragraphs, I will discuss these problems not so much as my critique to this particular book but as a general critique to all of us who write about contemporary Japan. To put this differently, this reviewer is quite aware that it is easy to critique while it is hard to find solutions to the problems I pose.

First, let me begin with an anecdote. In July 2012, the Fukushima Nuclear Accident Independent Investigation Committee released its report on the tragedy that struck Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plants in March 2011. This report, written by a group of Japanese experts, concludes: “This was a disaster ‘made in Japan.’ Its fundamental causes are to be found in the ingrained conventions of Japanese culture: our reflexive obedience, our reluctance to question authority; our devotion to ‘sticking with the programme’; our groupism; and our insularity” (quoted in CURTIS 2012). Criticizing this report, Gerald Curtis, a scholar of Japan,

wrote: “Culture does not explain Fukushima. People have autonomy to choose; at issue are the choices they make, not the cultural context in which they make them” (CURTIS 2012). Anthropologists are quite familiar with this line of criticism, which we also used to criticize BENEDICT’s analysis (1970) of wartime Japan: she explained it by solely exploring Japanese people’s “everyday habits of thought,” which she equated with Japanese culture and thus ran the risk of creating a psychological essentialism of Japanese people. I cannot help but use this line of criticism toward *Troubled Natures*.

According to Kirby, Japan is a “complex,” “non-Western” society, in which environmental problems are embroiled in “exceedingly Japanese ways of conceiving, relating and interacting” (1). Japan is “a society where status and group membership are paramount” (25, 102), “a historically male-dominated society” (35, 121), and has “a culture dominated by hierarchical consideration” (36). The book also contains many sentences in which “the Japanese,” “Japanese,” “the average Japanese,” or “many Japanese” are the subject. In these sentences, Kirby seem to have taken the homogeneity of Japanese society and a-historicity of Japanese culture for granted, despite his claims of not having done so elsewhere (particularly in conclusion) in the book.

I am not arguing that “culture” is not important in the analysis of environmental issues in contemporary Japan. To the contrary, I believe that the process of globalization tends to accentuate the claim of cultural differences of local people and that anthropologists are well situated in analyzing how people invoke their uniqueness of thought and behaviors. Yet, this “uniqueness” is not inherent in the timeless “Japanese” culture. Rather, it is often the expression of these people’s politics of culture in the face of desperately painful environmental destructions. At the same time, one must note that the “global” discourse of environment is hardly “global”: it is often the representation of the politics of not-so-large groups of people situated in industrial societies.

Second is the problematical use of “nature,” the key word in this book as it analyzes “Japan as self-claimed nature-focused society.” Yet his ethnography falls short of providing the reader with the sufficient narratives of people to prove this. Who says, aside from the author, that Japan is a nature-focused society? When and where do they say so and how? What words do they use for “nature”? It is indeed unfortunate that Kirby’s insertions of the informants’ original language here and there in this book do not answer these questions. I believe Kirby is quite aware of (in his own words) “the analytically limiting and socioculturally anchored concept of ‘nature’” (13). If so, why does he even elevate “nature” to the level of “cult(ures)” in Chapter 4? Kirby claims that the Japanese words for “nature” were “originally adopted from the Chinese approximately 1,500 years ago” (72). The meanings of those words, however, must have changed since then! Indeed, I would like to note that nature in the image of “village life in an agrarian community” emerged only recently, in the nineteenth century when the process of urbanization began in modern Japan.

Despite these criticisms, *Troubled Natures* presents us with many problems that industrial societies face today and forces us to reflect upon those problems. In par-

ticular, the book, written before the earthquake and tsunami that crippled Fukushima Nuclear Plants, ominously predicts the conditions prevailing in Japan today. Nonetheless, here too, the problems of “culture” and “nature” arise. “Illness is a common trigger for social exclusion, but *rather striking in Japan* is the notion that noncommunicable disease (or its perceived presence) can contaminate social relationships or interactions with strangers,” writes Kirby (122, emphasis mine). Indeed, it is now a historical truism that the victims of the nuclear bombing in Hiroshima and Nagasaki faced discrimination by their fellow compatriots after the war. Soon after the disaster of 11 March 2011, the Japanese media reported several cases in which the children of Fukushima, who had moved elsewhere in Japan, were bullied by their classmates due to their association with radiation. In addition, the media reported similar cases in which the workers of nuclear power plants had been ostracized by their neighbors also due to their association with radiation. Nonetheless, we should also note that this very “culture” turned many victims of the nuclear bombings into peace activists, pushed the mothers of Fukushima children to the forefront of anti-nuclear power movements, and spawned a variety of NGOs in support of nuclear power plant workers.

In conclusion, let me return to the report written by the Fukushima Nuclear Accident Independent Investigation Committee. The “cultural” argument that I have discussed above appears only in its English edition. Did the authors appeal to Japanese “culture” in order to explain the tragedy of Fukushima only for the English-speaking readers? If so, they “invoked” culture and it was their politics of culture. Rather than “culture” and “nature” as something inherent in timeless Japan, I wanted to see a more balanced analysis of the politics of culture in contemporary Japan.

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