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Panel proposal

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Session Title: *A Critical Disaster Studies Approach to Japan: Research Directions*

Session description

The social sciences have extensively examined disasters in Japan, particularly following the 1995 Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake and the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake. Recent events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2024 Noto Peninsula earthquake and flooding, have prompted a shift toward understanding disasters as interconnected phenomena rather than isolated incidents. This perspective emphasizes that disasters are embedded in long-term socio-political, historical, and economic contexts and occur within a multi-hazard framework that transcends temporal and spatial boundaries. Driven by this epistemological understanding, this panel adopts a critical disaster studies approach, using Japan as a case study to present innovative qualitative and theoretical insights. We will first outline the evolution of sociological disaster studies in Japan, emphasizing interdisciplinary and context-based methods for addressing disaster, risk, vulnerability, and resilience. Next, we will explore two key critical social issues: the experiences of older adults during recent disasters, identifying factors that heighten their risks; and lessons from gender-focused post-2011 disaster research, whose insights aim to inform gender-inclusive reconstruction practices following the 2024 flood disaster in Valencia, Spain. Finally, we will examine ecocriticism as a tool for analyzing Japanese disaster narratives in literature, film, and media, illustrating how disasters can disrupt yet also inspire new possibilities. This panel seeks to deepen our critical understanding of disasters and develop integrated, context-sensitive strategies for risk management and resilience in Japan and beyond.

Keywords: critical disaster studies, ecocriticism, Japan, Spain

SPEAKERS

1) Paola Cavaliere

Title: *Toward a Critical Disaster Studies in Japan and Beyond: Issues in Theory and Research*

Abstract

At the heart of Japan's disaster prevention and management, which serves as a model for global initiatives, lies a focus on policies and practices grounded in technological and structured systems to address disasters across all phases through government-led institutional frameworks. However, over the past two decades, this approach has faced increasing challenges due to the growing scale, multi-hazard nature, and cascading impacts of disaster events. Moreover, the impact of the earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear incident at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant during the Great East Japan Earthquake on March 11, 2011, signalled a tipping point and the end of the distinction between disastrous events caused by natural hazards and those anthropogenic. Drawing upon such epistemological evolution and related recent sociological study of disaster in Japan, this paper lays the theoretical framework for the presentations included in the session. It offers an outline of the evolution in the sociological study of disaster in Japan and the shift toward interdisciplinary, critical, context-based approaches to disaster, risk, vulnerability, and resilience that explore how pre-existing power relations in government, policy, and community stakeholders before disasters shape the event and the post-disaster outcomes in the short and long terms. This approach aims to enhance our understanding of disasters and to foster more integrated and context-sensitive strategies for managing risk and building resilience both in Japan and beyond, by examining enduring questions concerning the long-term availability of resources and power that shape their social construction. (241)

2) Junko Otani, University of Osaka & University of Melbourne

Title: *Older People and Disasters in Ageing society of Japan*

Japan's ageing society faces a series of disasters that put older individuals at greater risk for poor mental health and diminished cognitive function. Despite this vulnerability, older adults play crucial roles in disaster response and management, serving as valuable knowledge holders and leaders in resilience and recovery practices. As of May 8, 2024, Japan's Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare reports that 12.3% of people aged 65 and over have dementia, while 15.5% experience mild cognitive impairment (MCI). The number of dementia patients, which stood at 9.64 million in 2020, is projected to rise to 28.28 million by 2070. Over the next 50 years, dementia cases are expected to triple for both genders. Examining cases such as the 1995 Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake, the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami, the 2024 New Year Noto Peninsula Earthquake, and the COVID-19 pandemic will provide insights into the experiences of older people during disasters. This analysis aims to identify factors that increase risks for older adults and explore effective communication strategies for interacting with those living with dementia and their families in the aftermath of disasters. Additionally, it will highlight protective factors such as social support, community structures, and opportunities for older adults to engage in community disaster resilience and recovery efforts.

3) Carmen Grau Vila

Title: *Lessons from Japan to manage the disaster in Valencia: How gender-focused disaster research helped to understand the floods in Spain and impacted the media.*

Abstract

In the aftermath of the disaster that struck the Valencia region on October 29, 2024, I was compelled to contemplate the historical context of flooding in my family. This reflection prompted memories of my grandparents' experiences during the 1957 floods, as well as familial narratives regarding the dam break in 1982. Additionally, I recalled the catastrophic flooding that affected my hometown in 1996, raising critical questions about the repeated vulnerability of my community: Was history indeed repeating itself, or could these events be attributed to inadequate preventive measures or the broader implications of climate change? I immediately felt the urgency of disseminating crucial insights on Japan's disaster management derived from my several years' fieldwork where I undertook observation and in-depth interviews in disaster-affected regions of Japan. My inquiries focused on community leaders and their strategies for managing various disasters, including tsunamis, earthquakes, and floods, with particular attention to the roles of women and children in disaster response. Through a close examination of small rural communities and their reconstruction processes, this research aimed to draw comparative lessons relevant to the floods that impacted 80 towns in Spain. The findings underscored essential strategies across all disaster phases: effective prevention practices, mechanisms to mitigate gender-based violence during evacuations, volunteer engagement, guidelines for gender-inclusive reconstruction, and the transmission of knowledge to future generations. These lessons significantly influenced public discourse in Spain, being disseminated through various media channels and reaching audiences in both Spain and Latin America. (242)

4) Emily Bush (PhD) candidate

Title: *Ecocritical Analyses of Japanese Disaster Narratives*

Abstract

Cultural responses to disasters illustrate the ways in which disasters prompt reflection on beliefs about the world, anxieties, and hopes for the future. In creating disaster narratives, creators unpick their beliefs and anxieties and imagine extreme situations to speculate what could happen in the aftermath of disasters. Disaster narratives also often include commentary about socio-political issues and, more increasingly, about the environmental crisis (often referred to as the climate crisis). While a lot of academic work has focused on examining cultural responses to disasters, there is little focus on these environmental aspects.

Garrard (2012) argues that while science shows us the what and how, cultural materials can show us the *why* something should or should not be. He argues that ecocriticism - defined as 'the study of the relationship of the human and the non-human' (2012: 5) - can 'help to define, explore and even resolve ecological problems' (2012: 6) because of this. Therefore, I use ecocriticism as a methodological framework to examine Japanese disaster narratives in literature, films, and video games that are based on the Great Kantō Earthquake, the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the Great East Japan Earthquake, to draw out several environmental themes. These themes are a crisis of imagination; nonhumans and nature; a sense of place; and the post-apocalypse.

These themes illustrate how disasters both disrupt and inspire, and through creating narratives creators work through such disruptions to imagine a myriad of possible futures. (241)

References

Garrard. G. 2012. *Ecocriticism*. London; New York: Routledge.