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Post-3.11 Australia-Japan Co-operation: Facing non-traditional security challenges
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Items of Sentimental Value

To those for whom this talk and the photographs that accompany it may cause distress, I apologise, and hope that what I have to say will be taken in the spirit intended – that is, as a tribute to those who worked to find ways to alleviate distress, heal wounds, offer comfort and repair damage. This talk offers me (and I hope you as an audience) an opportunity to think through the meaning of ‘connection’, and the meaning of photographs, their relationship to collective memory and community, and their capacity to allow survivors and those who witness tragedy intimately or from a distance to better understand the trauma of a disaster like 3.11 and to begin a process of recovery.

Before I begin I would just like to say something about the ‘term’ 3.11: the first time I saw 3.11 used to refer to the Tohoku earthquake, tsunami and nuclear disaster of the 11th of March 2011, I was shocked and somewhat puzzled. The obvious parallel was to 9.11, but although a disaster of even larger, in fact, much larger proportion than the destruction of the Twin Towers in New York city, and even taking into account the culpability of the Japanese government and TEPCO, the Tohoku disaster was a natural one, not a man-made one. That is, it was not brought about by an act of war. So it would seem to me that the relationship drawn by association of 3.11 and 9.11 is in some ways an inappropriate one. Yet it may be that security is at issue in both – that being the inability to secure a people against disaster whether man-made, natural, or a combination of the two.

My talk this afternoon however is not about how the Japanese people might be better secured against the occurrence of a similar disaster in the future (an issue that is being argued out, not only in Japan but in Australia and throughout the world, in particular in relation to the safety of nuclear power). In a way, that is the point – what happens in Japan, whether it be an earthquake and associated tsunami, or nuclear meltdown and associated fallout, affects Australia, affects the countries of the Pacific Rim, and indeed the world. This is the basic physics of our planet: what goes up must come down; what goes around comes around.

Dubbed ‘the ghost ship’, a Japanese fishing vessel set adrift by the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami of March 2011, traversed the Pacific Ocean to reach the Gulf of Alaska a year later. This was a striking image, and a salutary reminder, of Pacific connection. In response to the likelihood of debris washing up on the west coast of North America, the Canadian province of British Columbia and the US states of

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Washington, Oregon and California, signed an agreement to co-ordinate management of the debris when it reaches their shores, and to ‘return items of sentimental value to Japan’.

One such item of ‘sentimental value’ became newsworthy in April 2012. A couple of months ago, a colleague of mine at the University of Wollongong, Australia, sent me the link to a story in the Sydney Morning Herald, entitled ‘Miracle Ball’. Reported in ‘The Fitz Files’ - a Saturday Sports column, Peter Fitzgerald writes:

I love this. Last week, as initially reported in the Anchorage Daily News, a bloke by the name of David Baxter was walking on the beach of a remote Alaskan island, when he spotted a very battered soccer ball with Japanese writing on it, which he took home so his Japanese wife could tell him what it said. She immediately identified it as having originated from a Japanese school that had been engulfed by the Tsunami. Enter the Japan Times, which found that the ball belonged to the 16-year old high school student, Misaki Murakami, who said the ball had been given to him by his third-grade classmates before he moved to a new school in March 2005. ‘To be honest, I’m surprised,’ he said. ‘I want to thank the person who found it as none of my sentimental items have been found.’ [my emphasis] And he will. The Baxters are going to go to Japan in the next summer holidays to give it to him personally.2

I then checked back through the Anchorage Daily News online, to discover a piece published on April 21st and another on April 24th entitled ‘Ball that drifted to Alaska after Japan tsunami is going home’, with a map indicating where the ball had been washed up. Then I checked back through the Japan Times online to discover an item published on April 23rd in which Misaki Murakami reflects on the loss and return of the ball: ‘My family lost everything to the tsunami,’ he says, ‘so I’m happy, but it also brings back sad memories. [my emphasis] The soccer ball means a lot to me, so I want to put it back in my room again when it comes back.’ (There has even been a follow-up piece published in The Japan Times as recently as the 28th May. It doesn’t add anything new, but keeps the news item alive until one presumes the news item can be written that details the return of the ball when the Baxters visit Japan this summer. The piece was identified as originating in New York.)

What is of interest to me here are the connections made not only by the ball traversing the Pacific ocean, but the news item itself, and the photographs that circulated with the story in each newspaper. Connection is made between Alaska, Japan, Australia, Japan, New York, Japan. A more recent, and less heart-warming story of connection made the news in The Japan Times of May 29, 2012. This piece reported the findings of a study published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, which revealed that trace amounts of radioactive cesium released from the crippled Fukushima No.1 plant had been found in blue-fin tuna caught off the coast of San Diego, California the previous August. The tuna were believed to have been in waters near Japan when the meltdowns occurred and migrated to the west coast of America on ocean currents. The finding is hardly surprising, but it serves to remind us once again of the connectedness of countries in the Pacific and those who share the Pacific Rim. Ocean currents determined the direction these various objects travelled in the Pacific (that is, from Japan’s east coast to America’s west coast), but had they been otherwise, the ghost ship, the soccer ball and the tuna might as easily have made landfall on the coast of Australia.

My talk today then is about connectedness – how connections are made and damaged; how they might be repaired or how they might even be so utterly broken that repair is impossible. Those

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connections are material (like the ship and the soccer ball) and ephemeral, they are both assisted and hindered by the thingness of this world, and the less tangible aspects of the world, like human emotion – happiness, grief, anger, pity, love. For Misaki Murakami, the soccer ball is an item of ‘sentimental value’ and thus precious, but it also brings back ‘sad memories’. Misaki might as easily have been talking about photographs as a soccer ball. So I am now going to move on to talk about connectedness in relation to the role played by photographs in the aftermath of the disaster, and the impact of those photographs on survivors and witnesses in Tokyo, Japan and Wollongong, Australia.

The day after I accepted a 10-month academic post at the University of Tokyo, I watched a black wave roll across my TV screen and into my living room. At least it felt like that. I watched footage of the devastating tsunami with a peculiarly personal horror, given I had already begun to imagine myself in Japan, and indeed, living not far from the disaster-struck area. The wave surged over the sea wall, up the beach and through the town taking boats, cars, trucks, houses, people with it, effortlessly. Its power was awe-inspiring (in the original sense of striking terror). I saw tiny figures pulled onto rooftops and struggling up hills. Could I see people’s faces behind car windows? No, I don’t think so. But I certainly imagined them.

Almost immediately upon receipt of news of the disaster, rescue teams and experts on disaster management came to Japan’s assistance from all over the world, and Australia was foremost among them. Evacuation, temporary housing and food for survivors was organised, and searches on a huge scale were undertaken to find those, alive or dead, in rubble the scale of which is difficult to comprehend. The usual video footage and photographs of the disaster-struck area dominated world TV, print- and e-media for days and weeks; until the news became old news. But in Tōhoku the work toward recovery had only just begun; and every day, day after day, people waited to hear news of family members and friends – presumed dead, but perhaps alive; presumed lost, but perhaps found. Images of an old man prodding ineffectively in the vast tangle of wreckage in search of human life; a woman in search of something material to take away as a keepsake from a life utterly destroyed; a distraught child, so small, so alone: these are the usual kind of images that attend such a disaster, as too are those that tell the story of the lucky ones – the heart-warming reunions and lives recovered.

My use of the phrase ‘the usual image’ is not intended to be glib about, or disrespectful of, those pictured in the photographs, but rather it indicates the degree to which photos of disasters tend to replicate previous disaster photos and themselves, thereby creating a tiredness in the intended observer, and a replication of a requisite emotion that feels emptied out or false (that is from the point of view of the observer who sits outside the tragedy). Faced with the ‘disaster photo’ yet again, I become not unlike a disaster tourist of Jon Mitchell’s poem, ‘tourists’:

back a bit left
your left
stupid

the father bullies into
place his sleepy wife
and daughter before
balancing his camera
atop a top-turned taxi
and racing the flash
for a family photograph
among the ruins of somebody else's life

the tourists have arrived in tsunami country

I'm not actually taking the disaster photo, but my act of looking at the photo participates in the original act of taking the photo; and it may be a 'well intentioned' photograph taken for news reportage rather than a gratuitous act of 'tourism', but nevertheless I feel uncomfortable with this kind of voyeurism. I am in effect the eye behind the camera that watches the weeping woman amongst the debris, which makes me complicit in the action of taking the photograph and exhibiting her distress for all to see and consume, without permission of the woman herself. The weeping woman? Who is she?

On the anniversary of the Tōhoku/Fukushima disaster, the cutline for David McNeil's piece in The Independent reads: 'First the earthquake, then the tsunami, and a nuclear crisis. But as David McNeil found, millions of people are still struggling with the hardest part of all: picking up the pieces.' The article is accompanied by a photograph of a woman who 'sits and weeps in the remains of the city of Natori... Her life and the city of Natori (as demonstrated in the photograph) are 'in pieces'. I don't know who the weeping woman is; and I don't want to discuss the ethics of photographic voyeurism any further at this time. What I want to do at this point is talk about a curious thing that happened in the wreckage of cities and towns like Natori, where a different kind of 'picking up the pieces' occurred and to which a different kind of photo from the usual was attached; and then to discuss the exhibition of these 'different' photos in relation to a photographic exhibition about Tōhoku that took place at my university in Wollongong, Australia.

A Different Kind of 'Disaster Photo'

Tomoki Matsumoto, manager of the Akaaka gallery where these different photos were displayed, is reported as saying, 'Many photographers took many photos of debris and other things in the tsunami-ravaged areas, but our photos show another side of the truth about the disaster.' At the exhibition of these photos posters were displayed (back and front) on one of the walls. One side of each poster reproduced a number of photos from the exhibition, and on the other side large black text (in Japanese and English translation) explained the project, its genesis, development and hoped-for outcomes. The posters were on sale for JY1,000 (AUD10) each, and buyers were informed that 70% of the proceeds would go toward assisting people in temporary housing. The text of one of those posters reads:

As the search for survivors ended and attention turned to the clean up mission, Self-Defense forces, firemen, and policemen who were in Tohoku to help survivors began to pick up photos they found in the mud, and to store them in an elementary school gymnasium. They were not asked to do it, nor did they have a clear sense of their objective. Perhaps they were just desperate to find something in the rubble that could be saved. [Figure 1]

I don't know if the retrieval and storage of photographs on this kind of scale is unprecedented in the history of disasters, but it was a curious phenomenon. Unpremeditated and lacking an organised
structure, it might have been inspired by the survivors who searched the rubble to find anything of their former lives. Certainly it suggests a shared recognition of the sentimental value attached to personal photographs. The unnamed author of the poster text informs viewers that:

The images varied in condition, from relatively clean to damaged beyond recognition. Some of the photographs you see here were so badly eroded by bacteria that they could not be cleaned, and therefore could not be returned. But each of these images, kept in drawers or cabinet, was someone’s treasured memory until that fateful day.

Two months after the earthquake, a group calling itself the ‘Memory Salvage Project’ was formed to sort, clean, digitize and assist with identification and return of the photos to their owners. Photographer, Munemasa Takahashi, assisted by a team of more than 500 volunteers, offered to head the operation in the city of Yamamoto (Miyagi Prefecture). Of 30,000 photos, 19,200 were returned and 1,500 of those remaining were selected by Takahashi for the exhibition. The text on one of the posters details statistics of Yamato town’s loss: 50% of the town was flooded by the tsunami which swept away the harbour, houses, cars, trains and people; 614 people died out of the town’s population of 16,700. Of these statistics, the unnamed author remarks: ‘I’ve come to realize that just telling the facts in words [is] not enough. Numbers do not tell what it is like to lose loved ones all of a sudden, and not being able to see them again to tell a joke or even to apologize or just to say thank you anymore.’ This says something more than the old adage that ‘a picture is worth a thousand words’: rather it suggests that the exhibition of ‘Family Photos Swept by 3.11 East Japan Tsunami’ is an attempt to express loss and love through the bringing together of the photographs themselves, and through the caring act of rescue and restitution. The cleaning and presentation of the photographs is also, for me, reminiscent of the washing, dressing and display of the dead body, and attendant funeral rites. [Figure 2]

The exhibition of photographs and the actions involved in every step of its creation and its reception is a tribute, a memorial and an attempt to repair a severely damaged community. I would like now to discuss the exhibition: the photos themselves – individually and collectively, what they might be understood to represent, the meanings that might be attached to them, and their impact or affective capacity.

The Exhibition: ‘Lost and Found’

On Thursday, January 26, 2012, the front page of The Japan Times featured a piece titled, ‘Photos found in tsunami aftermath displayed’, accompanied by a photograph of a woman peering very closely at a wall of rectangular objects, set in close juxtaposition to each other. The newspaper photograph is printed in colour, but the colours of this image are mainly white, shades of grey with the occasional
A splash of yellow and a faded red. It is an image that would be very hard to decipher, if it weren't for the title and attached caption that identifies the rectangular shapes as photographs. A brief outline of the project that lay behind the exhibition followed, and I was sufficiently intrigued to search out the gallery (no easy task in Tokyo).

What did I find in this exhibition of 'the lost'? The newspaper photograph did not prepare me for what I would see, or rather, not see. Part of me, rather bizarrely given I had read the newspaper article, still expected to see 'disaster photos'. What I saw on entering the gallery space was a full wall, from ceiling to floor, of personal family photographs [Figure 3]: photographs pre-disaster; photographs that were, in one sense, of no interest to me, given the people photographed had no connection with me. I knew nothing of them or their lives. As you would expect these were photographs of weddings [Figure 4] and family festivities; children at school, at play [Figure 5], at home; family groups; [Figure 6] work mates and the work place; places
visited, scenes encountered etc. What was unexpected was the degree to which I could not actually see anything much. I, along with everyone else, had to peer very closely at the photos in an attempt to make out ‘something’ – and by ‘peer very closely’ I mean literally put my nose to within a millimetre of the wall. Some photographs revealed bits of people and things with clarity; but many were so badly damaged they reminded me of the blotting paper pictures we created as children by placing the paper on the surface of water on which oil had been dropped.

‘What are we supposed to feel and think when we look at these pictures?’ asks the author of the poster text:

Should we be happy that they were found at all, or sad that they will never be returned to their owners? Or should we simply mourn for the dead? The more I struggle to find answers, the more missing pieces I seem to find. But without looking at these pictures, I don’t think we’ll see anything at all.

‘Without looking at these pictures, I don’t think we’ll see anything at all’: an interesting statement, particularly given the proliferation of disaster photos that surely attempt to show us something. It would seem that the author of the poster is claiming that we require some kind of aid that will allow us to see, but that the aid offered by disaster photography, or by the proliferation of words, is no aid at all. What is it that we see when we look at this collection of damaged personal photos? What I saw was a collective portrait of the lives lost to a community, before the disaster itself and the hype of media reportage rendered those lives somehow unreal – outside the range of ordinary day-to-day experience. The photographs bring those people back into the realm of the living and the everyday. Perhaps this is ‘the other side of the truth’ that the photographs show: disasters like 3.11 take us into the realm of the unimaginable and the surreal, but ultimately that unreal world is and must be understood and incorporated back into the real and ordinary. The distance created between victim and survivor, survivor and onlooker, needs to be bridged. Interestingly, the act of having to peer so closely at the photographs brings with it a physical intimacy, perhaps a bridging of distance and difference; although this may be taking the idea too far.

Finally, the damaged photographs could be understood as ‘disaster photos’ of a different kind - not only in the sense that they had undergone disaster themselves, but in the image thereby produced: the damaged photos appear to be photographic images of tsunami, fire, earthquake – they reflect both the damage done (to people, landscape and buildings) and the actual force of the damage. It is a curious effect. [Figure 7] ‘Unlike any other visual image,’ explains John Berger in concert with Susan Sontag, ‘a photograph is not a rendering, an imitation or an interpretation of its subject, but actually a trace of it.’ What would Berger make of the extraordinary phenomenon of these photographs? ‘Some people say,'
comments the gallery manager, Matsumoto, 'these photos are beautiful'; they are beautiful, strange, revelatory; and moving. I found myself unexpectedly affected by photographs that personalise the 'victims' in a way that the 'usual disaster' photos do not.

So let me turn now to an exhibition of photographs mounted in a small space inside the library at the University of Wollongong from the 18th to the 27th May 2012. Most of the photographs had been on display at an earlier exhibition in the Customs House Library in Sydney. For the Customs House exhibition, sixty-one photographs were chosen from a collection of 113 photographs that were put together by the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Public Diplomacy Planning Division), under the title ‘Tohoku Region – Rebuilding for a Better Tomorrow’. 2/3s of the photos for the Customs House exhibition were selected from ‘scenes of reconstruction’ and the remaining 1/3 from ‘attractions of Tohoku’. Photos were selected on the basis of what was believed to be of most interest to Australians; and according to the organiser of the exhibition, ‘It was hoped that visitors to the exhibition would be able to see for themselves the strength that victims of the disaster are showing as they work to rebuild their lives and communities.’ It is also apparent, given the number of photos selected from the ‘attractions of Tohoku’ group, that the exhibition was designed to encourage Australians back to the Tohoku area, or, probably more realistically, just back to Japan.

The exhibition at the University of Wollongong, organised by Dr. Rowena Ward, draw in large part on this photographic collection. It was brought to my attention in an email with an advertising flyer attached. The exhibition is simply named ‘Tohoku’; a blurb at the bottom gives the magnitude of the disaster (in terms of the earthquake itself, and the number of lives lost and people missing). This is followed with a description of the Exhibition’s focus:

In the aftermath of the tragedy, across Japan, a spirit of 'Gambaro Tohoku' or 'Let's pull together for Tohoku' emerged. The spirit remains strong, as those in the affected areas continue to rebuild their lives. The images in the 'Tohoku Exhibition' focus on the positive and show how far the people affected by the earthquake and tsunami have come since the tragedy of March 2011.

When I asked the organiser what response she had had to the exhibition, she commented that most people felt the exhibition served to remind them 'that people are still suffering and will be suffering for some time to come;' and some were made aware (in particular by a photograph of a pile of debris amounting to 100 years worth of garbage) of the aftermath in terms of cleanup. Rather than photographs of distress as such, these photographs concentrated on the positive stories of survival in the spirit of ‘gambaro’. Many photos came as a set, an example being a 3-photo panel that featured an elderly couple. The first photo showed the couple in the wreckage of their home; the second showed them some time later in their new home; and the third showed them having just picked a daikon from their new vegetable patch. This was a popular photo for obvious reasons. A similar 3-photo panel was captioned: ‘A family: Although many people lost homes to the tsunami, families survived. Treasured possessions rescued from the wreckage help them face the future.’ The first photo, showing two parents holding a photograph of their young daughter in front of the wreckage of their home, was captioned ‘A treasured portrait recovered from the ruins of their home.’ The middle photo showed the happy family (father, mother and child) in front of their temporary home. Their daughter is positioned between her parents, holding the photo of her younger self. The last photo showed the family sitting at the kitchen table, looking relaxed and happy (despite the fact that this is still a temporary home). In this photo panel
Post-3.11 Australia-Japan Co-operation: Facing non-traditional security challenges

emphasis is placed again on the positive – the family is united and apparently recovered from trauma. Not only 'the sentimental value' of the family photograph but what would appear to be its centrality to recovery of 'home' and happiness is highlighted.

I asked a number of individuals for their responses to the exhibition and interestingly, whilst acknowledging their appreciation of the work that the exhibition did to bring about awareness of the continued and continuing struggle of ravaged communities, they also expressed a concern about the positive spin – yes there was huge admiration for all the people who struggled to put lives back together, but there was also concern about 'the elephant in the room', that elephant being the devastating long-term impact of the nuclear catastrophe. Given that the original Customs House exhibition upon which the University of Wollongong exhibition draw was designed to encourage a return to positive thinking about Japan generally, and the Tōhoku area particularly, one visitor to the exhibition remarked: 'The reason that Japan is felt to be out of bounds isn't quake damage it's nuclear fear, and so to illustrate the rebuilding of infrastructure is to answer the wrong question.'

Whilst acknowledging this, my concern about the positive spin is somewhat different, and pertains to the photo panel of the elderly couple that so many visitors found heart-warming and uplifting. Statistics gathered about the impact of 3.11 indicate that 65% of deaths were of those aged over 60 and 70% of those still missing are also over 60, a large number of whom are in their 70s or 80s. I want in closing, to think what this might mean in relation to the 'Lost and Found' exhibition and to a woman's words I overheard on a video set up in the corner of the exhibition room. Somewhat overwhelmed by the 'Lost and Found' project, she declared, 'we have lost our memories.'

'We have lost our memories'

The phrase 'we have lost our memories' might not only allude to the loss of photographs as records of events, people, places, things, that either become memories or act as mnemonic devices, or photographs as the means by which the past and our place within it can be reconstructed, again and again. In other words, it might not only allude to the loss of the material object and its associated purpose or function; it might also allude to the loss of the people themselves of whom the photos were taken, or who took the photos, or those, most importantly, who could make sense of the photos – those who could read and tell the story of the images, that is, make the link between people, place and time. This is not just a question of 'making sense' but one of maintaining community across generations and through time. It is easy to forget that photographs will always tell a story, but it may not be a story that has any basis in lived 'truth'.

I was made aware of this recently, when a set of photos, collected in a biscuit tin now rusted with age, were retrieved from my great-aunt's effects and given to me. But I did not recognise any of the people in the photos and had no immediate way of making sense of what I was seeing. The photos meant nothing to me, except as items of sentimental value (being valued by my great-aunt and my great-aunt being of value to me), because I had no means of de-coding them. How could I place the people I saw in the photos in relation to my own life or my great-aunt's life without a code? Occasionally a name and date scribbled on the back of a photo might be deciphered – 'Joan, Easter or 'Bob, 50th Birthday'. The scribble might provide me with a starting point from which to ask questions, but what I really needed was an interpreter – a family member or a family friend from an earlier generation, who knew or knew of the people, their relationships, their stories, their lives.
Not only were many members of Tōhoku communities 'lost', many of those lost were elderly, taking with them the memories of those communities. 'We have lost our memories' is a phrase that although at first might have seemed banal or even facile, takes on a depth and significance that is devastating. Despite the efforts of 'The Memory Salvage Project' to find that which has been lost, there may be no recovery, of memory or of original communities. A wall of illegible photos is emblematic of the tragic inevitability of loss in a disaster of this magnitude. This is grim, perhaps too grim, for as recently pointed out to me, those survivors (both young and old) who visit the exhibition will surely be reminded of 'life before' and carry that memory with them into the future of newly constituted communities. A photographic exhibition, because it is a public exhibition, and one in this case that attracted many survivors in search of a record of lives lost, is so much more than my great aunt's rusty tin of photos.

Works Cited

Japan Times [online], 23 April, 28 & 29 May, 2012.
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(Endnotes)
1) A section of this talk has been published in Social Alternatives, 32:3 (2012), pp.5-10.
2) Sydney Morning Herald, April 28, 2012, online.
6) In his essay 'Uses of Photography' (published together with other essays in About Looking), Berger responds to Susan Sontag's book, On Photography.