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Article:

Matanle, P. (2016) Do I stay or do I go now? A researcher's response to the Great East Japan Earthquake, tsunami and Fukushima nuclear disaster. *Japan Forum*, 28 (3). pp. 385-393. ISSN 0955-5803

<https://doi.org/10.1080/09555803.2016.1167763>

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**Do I Stay or Do I Go Now?
A Researcher's Response to the Great East Japan Earthquake, Tsunami and
Fukushima Nuclear Disaster**

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The final definitive version of this article has been published in:

Japan Forum.

An electronic version is available here:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09555803.2016.1167763>.

Suggested Citation

Matanle, P. (2016) Do I Stay or Do I Go Now? A Researcher's Response to the Great East Japan Earthquake, Tsunami and Fukushima Nuclear Disaster, *Japan Forum*, DOI: 10.1080/09555803.2016.1167763.

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Do I Stay or Do I Go Now?

A Researcher's Response to the Great East Japan Earthquake, Tsunami and Fukushima Nuclear Disaster

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11 March 2011

11 March 2011 was a beautiful Spring day in Kyoto. In the morning I cycled to my office to continue writing up a book chapter I was preparing on lifetime employment in Japan. Then around lunch time I cycled to the Kyoto International Manga Museum, partly to enjoy the lovely weather, but also to see if their collections would help in a collaborative research article I was planning on Japanese popular cultural depictions of gender inequality in the workplace.

Home to around 40 universities, Kyoto is quiet in March, which marks the transition between the end of the Japanese academic year in February and the beginning of the next one in April. I was enjoying the lull. I was stationed at Doshisha University for the British academic year 2010-11 as Director of the Sheffield-Doshisha Centre, and taking one year research leave to write up some outstanding projects and get others started. The one that had been taking most of my time and interest was a multi-authored book length treatment of the consequences of long-term population decline in Japan's provincial regions.¹ Doshisha and Kyoto combined to make an ideal setting. Kyoto is small and flat enough to be able to travel around quickly and easily by bicycle, which I loved. Doshisha is a wonderful institution to work at, with the Imadegawa campus located in the centre of the northern half of the city, and resources enough to make one's stay comfortable and productive. I had been getting a lot done.

2.46pm

The moment that the Great East Japan Earthquake began, I was cycling north up Kyoto's Karasuma Dōri from the Manga Museum and towards my office at Doshisha's Imadegawa Campus. I didn't experience any shaking and was unaware of anything untoward until about three o'clock when I was back in my office. I went online and saw that there had been a powerful earthquake off the coast of Miyagi Prefecture. I was concerned because there had been both a magnitude 7.2 earthquake in that region two days earlier and a destructive M_w 6.3 quake in Christchurch, New Zealand, around 20 days previously. The Japan Meteorological Agency (JMA) website was reporting a magnitude 8.9 earthquake, as was the United States Geological Service (USGS).² I knew immediately that this was a huge earthquake and quickly surfed news and social media websites. The JMA was warning of a 10 metre plus tsunami along the eastern seaboard of Tōhoku. I had friends there, and wrote on Facebook at around 3.15pm 'Is everyone OK? Just heard about the earthquake in Miyagi.' I cycled back to my apartment in north Kyoto as fast as I could to watch the coverage on TV.

As soon as I switched on the TV at around 3.45 I saw live footage being broadcast of the tsunami advancing inland. As it swept over villages and towns, smashing buildings to pieces, I wondered who

¹ Matanle, P., Rausch, A.S. and the Shrinking Regions Research Group (2011) *Japan's Shrinking Regions in the 21st Century: Contemporary Responses to Depopulation and Socioeconomic Decline*, Amherst, NY: Cambria Press.

² Subsequently re-rated by JMA and USGS to M_w 9.0.

could survive the onslaught. I managed to talk to my wife on Skype while watching, telling her what I was seeing. It didn't seem real. Later I went to the supermarket and bought a *bento* supper and some red wine. It was going to be a long night.

Evening

In the early evening, while watching the unfolding crisis and participating in a below-the-line (BTL) discussion on the *Guardian* rolling news webpage, I heard that the government had declared a National Nuclear Emergency at the Fukushima Dai-Ichi nuclear power plant and was advising locals to stay indoors. I immediately reported this on the *Guardian*. Someone from the *Guardian* then posted in response, asking me where I was and how did I know, and for contact information. I told them I was watching NHK TV rolling news coverage from my apartment in Kyoto. No one got in touch. Was I the first person to report the Fukushima crisis in the British media, watching TV from my apartment in Kyoto, I wondered incredulously? I spent the rest of the night watching TV and communicating with friends, colleagues, and family through any means I could: social media, skype, phone, email, and BTL conversations. One poignant conversation on Facebook was about a former Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme colleague from Australia who had moved to Kobe and died in the Great Hanshin Earthquake on 17 January 1995. I thought about the JET participants living along the coast of Tōhoku.

That night was the first of many when I went to bed hoping and reassuring myself that things couldn't get any worse, only to wake up next morning and discover that, indeed, things had got a lot worse. I had begun to think through the implications for my research on depopulating regions and whether we would need to negotiate changes to our book.

March 2011

The next few days went by like in a dream. I was glued to the TV and didn't venture further than my local supermarket for supplies. I didn't want to be out of contact range, or of the news, for longer than a few minutes. All channels were broadcasting continuously about the disaster. News from Fukushima was getting worse and was beginning to overwhelm what for me was the bigger problem of the destroyed coastal communities. International media were completely consumed with the nuclear crisis and sensationalist in comparison with Japanese coverage. I wondered which information could be trusted. Was the Japanese media holding back in order not to cause alarm, or was the foreign coverage making the Fukushima crisis into something that it wasn't? Deep disagreement among academics and scientists over the nature and severity of the crisis was not helping.

On 12 and 14 March hydrogen explosions ripped apart the buildings housing Units 1 and 3 at the Fukushima plant, and on 15 March there were explosions at Units 2 and 4. On 16 March it was announced that fuel in Units 1, 2 and 3 was melting and core meltdowns were probably occurring; no one knew if the containment vessels had also been breached. On 16 March it was reported that the spent fuel rods in the containment pool at Unit 4 could be exposed to the atmosphere and reaching criticality. On the morning of 17 March I sat in my *yukata* watching TV in amazement, hoping that Self-Defence Force helicopters would successfully drop water into the spent fuel pool at Unit 4. One drop was successful, but two others had the wind blowing water away. On 18 March firefighters arrived from Tokyo and sprayed water through enormous cannons, which was more successful; but how long could they keep this up? On the same day radiation was detected 30km to the northwest of the damaged plant, and there were reports of radiation polluting the water supply and wind in Tokyo. Day after day the bad news kept coming. On 28 March plutonium was discovered

in the grass around the Fukushima plant. On 12 April the nuclear crisis was re-rated 7 on the International Nuclear Event Scale, placing it alongside the catastrophe at Chernobyl in 1986. In my darkest moments I wondered whether there might be a mass evacuation from Tōhoku, or even Tokyo, towards the south-west. I discovered later that Prime Minister Kan had also considered this eventuality. Was I in the way?

Do I stay or do I go now?

In the first week of the crisis an event I was looking forward to was cancelled. It was a celebration of sister city ties between Sheffield and Kawasaki, which borders Tokyo to the south-west. The Mayor of Kawasaki was scheduled to attend and I was representing the University of Sheffield, which might have given me access to Kawasaki City Office for research. The city office had also organised for me to make some local visits. The event's cancellation indicated that the possibilities for pursuing fieldwork had greatly diminished.

Throughout the second half of March punk rock band The Clash's *Should I Stay or Should I Go?* was continuously playing in my head. One verse kept recurring and I posted the first line on Facebook.

Should I stay or should I go now?
If I go there will be trouble,
And if I stay it will be double.
So you got to let me know,
Should I cool or should I blow?

I had been receiving daily exhortations from friends and family to return to Britain. The German and French communities in the Tokyo area were leaving on the advice of their governments and employers. Even in Kansai I heard stories of non-Japanese leaving, or not arriving to take up new posts. In Kyoto an informal group formed among non-Japanese teaching and research staff to discuss how to respond, and I was communicating with my own university about how to help our students, particularly undergraduates on their year abroad and postgraduates located near the disaster zone. I could at least be useful in this respect, so I leaned towards staying and helping. Dr Thomas McAuley, who was leading our department's response, would also need a base, and my apartment in Kyoto was ideal. In the days before Tom arrived I helped three of our students by booking one into a hotel in Kyoto and assisted two others in working through their options on the phone.

Three more things convinced me to remain. The first was when Mr Nishioka of the Doshisha University International Office assured me that I wasn't in the way and that, if anything, foreigners remaining in place were comforting for the Japanese people around them. The second was the travel advice coming from the British Embassy in Tokyo, which seemed balanced and calm. Although there did not appear to be a coordinated response among the Western embassies, the British Embassy's advice stood out for its reassuring and sensible approach based on scientific principles laid out by Sir John Beddington, the British government's Chief Scientific Advisor. Third was my own research.

Researching the Great East Japan Earthquake, Tsunami and Nuclear Disaster

By late-March I had decided to stay, but this presented an additional dilemma; whether and how to incorporate the disaster into my work on shrinking regions. As mentioned, I had been preparing a co-authored book on regional depopulation and decline. By 11 March we were preparing to submit

our final draft and go into production, but we now needed to make crucial additions and amendments. This was a major event in Japan's history, and Tōhoku was and is one of Japan's shrinking regions. Not to include the disaster would have rendered the book immediately out of date. So I gathered my notes and impressions of the events as they were unfolding and condensed them into producing an epilogue which the publisher agreed to include.

The more I thought about what the Tōhoku region and the people of Japan were enduring, the more I realised that I should write and publish about the disaster from the perspective of depopulation and regional decline. All of the communities along the northeastern coast of Japan had been in the grip of rapid and severe ageing and depopulation prior to 11 March 2011. This disaster was likely to accelerate those trends and further weaken what were already vulnerable aged communities. The compound nature of the various intersecting long and short term pressures made this 'techno-environmental event' both unique in human experience, but perhaps the shape of things to come for East Asia in the 21st century, as the region encounters the confluence of climate change, economic expansion and technological development, and ageing and depopulation. Japan's experience of these phenomena as a 'pioneer' ageing and depopulating country could be instructive, and I felt I had something useful to bring to that discussion.

I nevertheless experienced considerable self-doubt. The disaster had unleashed a deluge of media and academic comment, some of it wildly inaccurate and sensationalist, and there was a danger of crossing the boundary between writing from the perspective of being able to say something informative and useful, and that of being opportunistic. These feelings were brought to the surface because, at around the time the disaster struck, I had been asked (nominated) to be one of our department's impact case studies for the upcoming Research Excellence Framework (REF) in 2014. For this I would need to gather evidence of the impact of my research beyond academia among, potentially, policy makers, corporations, citizens' groups, media organisations, and the general public in the UK, Japan and elsewhere. It was an honour to be selected, but it introduced a new set of complications. Much of the potential impact that I could generate from my research on shrinking regions would be among municipal and prefectural governments, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, international media, and local citizens groups in Japan. I had been hoping, for example, that the visit to Kawasaki City would provide a chance to develop this new aspect of my work, but this had proved impossible. I had about six months left in Japan to develop impact and gather the evidence, but the people I needed to make a difference with were understandably preoccupied by events and didn't need a British academic diverting their attention.

Throughout the Spring and Summer I consumed everything I could get my hands on that could yield fresh insights into and information about the disaster and its aftermath, and I wrote as much as I could. It was frustrating that so much attention was focused on the nuclear crisis and the political situation in Tokyo when, from my perspective, the question of what to do about the destroyed communities further north in Miyagi and Iwate prefectures appeared at least as pressing a difficulty. To date 15,894 people are confirmed to have died and 2,562 remain missing as a result of the tsunami.³ Yet there have been few, if any, deaths directly attributable to radiation exposure at the Fukushima plant. This was worthy of attention, I felt, but I had to concentrate on writing what I knew. I completed the epilogue to our book and submitted an article to a peer reviewed journal by the end

³ National Police Agency figures on 10 February 2016 - http://www.npa.go.jp/archive/keibi/biki/higaijokyo_e.pdf.

of April.⁴ In May my family visited and I spent most of the month with them, taking my daughter for evening walks in Kyoto, visiting friends in Tokyo and Niigata, and simply being together. I also spent time tidying publications in various stages of production, and moving them through to publication. In all I was able to produce seven research publications as a result of spending the year in Kyoto; a co-authored book, an edited book, three journal articles, and two book chapters.⁵

Conclusion

Despite the ever-present reminders of the disaster in daily media coverage, energy conservation measures, and endless conversations in online academic discussion forums, that half year was productive and fulfilling for me. I made some new friendships and deepened others. I was happy being able to help others. I was producing research at a higher level of quality and quantity than before and I was confident that it had meaning beyond myself. I am glad that I decided to remain and incorporate the disaster into my research. It opened up opportunities for reaching new audiences on my return to Sheffield. I was invited to present the annual Japan Society lecture to secondary school teachers and students at the Geographical Association's conference in Manchester, which snowballed into presentations to local groups in Lincoln, Wimbledon, Harrogate, Sheffield, London and Manchester. I even got paid for some of those, and they fed into the new impact agenda. I was pleased that my research was making an appreciable contribution to academic discourse. I was invited, for example, to be international advisor on a prestigious – and ultimately successful – funding application in New Zealand; which has opened new opportunities for extending the geographical range of my research, as well as allowed me to visit that beautiful country twice since.

In August 2011 and twice in 2013 I visited Tōhoku to see for myself what had happened and how the recovery was taking place. I plan to go there again soon. I hadn't wanted to go earlier because I didn't want to get in the way of emergency and recovery services, and I didn't want to contribute to turning the disaster area into a locale for dark tourism. Nevertheless, I needed to do so if I was going to comment on the disaster in my research. Something that will stay with me was the terrible smell I encountered on the north coast of Ishinomaki in August 2011. My taxi driver, who had established a route for taking visitors around the disaster area, made a point of taking me there for a more visceral experience. It was the smell of thousands of tons of frozen fish and whale meat, which had been stored long term in huge warehouses arranged along the shore of the fishing port, rotting in the hot August sunshine.

On each visit to Tōhoku I have been treated with kindness, openness and generosity by residents, volunteers, and municipal employees, who were insistent that their story be recorded and told. I'm pleased that I have done what they asked and, hopefully, through my research can help other ageing and depopulating areas in Asia if and when they experience similar shocks in the coming years.

⁴ Matanle, P. (2011) The Great East Japan Earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdown: towards the (re)construction of a safe, sustainable, and compassionate society in Japan's shrinking regions, *Local Environment*, 16 (9): 823-847.

⁵ Details are available from my personal website (www.peter-matanle.com) and Academia.edu (<https://sheffield.academia.edu/PeterMatanle>).

Photos

Figure 1. The near shore area of Ishinomaki City in Miyagi Prefecture was swept away in the disaster. The burned out remains of Kadokawa Elementary School are in the background (August 2011).



Figure 2. The tsunami reached as high as the fourth story of this apartment block overlooking the bay in Rikuzentakata, Iwate Prefecture (August 2011).



Figure 3. A destroyed warehouse for long term storage of frozen whale meat in the northern port area of Ishinomaki City, Miyagi Prefecture (August 2011).



Figure 4. Rikuzentakata, Iwate Prefecture, in January 2013.

