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Book review

## Book review: *Gender, Culture, and Disaster in Post-3.11 Japan*, by Mire Koikari

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**Peer review**

This article has been through editorial review.

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## Book review: *Gender, Culture, and Disaster in Post-3.11 Japan*, by Mire Koikari

London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020, 240 pp., ISBNs: 978-1-3501-2249-9 (hbk); 978-1-3501-2251-2 (ebk); 978-1-3501-2250-5 (epdf)

Registering 9.0 on the Richter scale, the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake (hereafter, 3.11 disaster) is one of the largest and most damaging in history. *Gender, Culture, and Disaster in Post-3.11 Japan*, by sociologist Mire Koikari, Professor of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at the University of Hawai'i, illustrates the interrelationship between cultural production and the Japanese government's agenda to mobilise men, women and children in post-disaster national reconstruction. Comprised of six chapters, the book draws on key themes encompassing genderisation (Chapters 2 and 3), militarism (Chapter 4) and Japan's past and present international relations (Chapter 5). This will not surprise anyone who is familiar with Koikari's previous academic work traversing feminism, nationalism, security culture/securitisation and imperialism, all of which are recurring motifs throughout the book.

Koikari illuminates post-3.11 disaster resilience building as a deeply politicised process embedded in the tenets of capitalism, neoliberalism and neoconservatism. Readers expecting this book to provide

an assessment of the effectiveness or appropriateness of Japan's resilience-building efforts may be slightly disappointed. What they will find is an examination of the wider implications of top-down attempts to create a sense of security amid precarity by situating the book's key themes amid national and transnational dynamics. Koikari warns of the dangers of taking certain seemingly innocuous cartoon characters, popular television personalities and influential sports figures at face value, encouraging readers to take a critical stance towards them in relation to the Japanese government's political agenda. Citing a myriad of movies, characters, magazines, books, websites and television programmes, Koikari provides a succinct analysis of the ways in which the 3.11 disaster, and its resultant recovery and resilience-building process, have affirmed pre-existing norms within Japanese society.

The most reiterated norm throughout the book is the post-disaster cultural and societal emphasis on pre-existing gender roles in the workplace and at home. Japanese men are increasingly expected to be physically hardy, adaptable and flexible to survive any form of crisis, calamity or catastrophic event, especially in a professional context. They have been called to take on the role of 'corporate warriors' (17, 33) in the workplace, protecting the nation's economy in times of crisis. By contrast, women are implored to bear all responsibility on the domestic front by ensuring safety and security within their homes in preparation for a disaster through what Koikari fittingly describes as an emerging 'cult of domesticity' (44).

Of particular interest and relevance to the audience of this journal is Chapter 4, which sheds light on the intricate links between education, militarism and policy. Koikari details a slew of educational disaster resilience initiatives ranging from the comprehensive 2013 *Development of Disaster Prevention Education for 'Zest for Living'* guidelines by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) to the intensified involvement of the Japan Self-Defence Forces (JSDF) in disaster education in schools. In so doing, she deftly reveals how what appear to be straightforward disaster resilience policies aimed at cultivating preparedness among Japanese youth are fundamentally intertwined with neoliberal ideologies propagated by intergovernmental organisations such as UNICEF and the OECD. Further, Koikari scrutinises the intentions underlying the militarisation of disaster education, demonstrating the Japanese government's agenda to engender a sense of familiarity and support for the JSDF and future militaristic policies among children and young people, who embody the future of the nation.

Much of the available literature on post-3.11 disaster resilience and recovery concentrates on prevention and mitigation measures in preparation for future extreme events, and so this book offers a fresh analytical perspective. While academics adopting a similar theoretical approach to Koikari have scrutinised the ways in which the disaster recovery process is portrayed through various media, including social networks (for example, Hjorth and Kim, 2011), newspapers (for example, Shineha, 2021) and disaster museums (for example, Maly and Yamazaki, 2021), few have viewed it through the combined lens of culture, gender, militarism and international relations that Koikari employs. Samuels's (2013) book on the 3.11 disaster and subsequent change in Japan bears certain resemblances to Koikari's in terms of its analysis of national security and governance in post-3.11 disaster Japan. However, it is largely centred on energy policy and political leadership, thereby veering away from Koikari's notion of the disaster as a cultural and gendered construct. Similarly, whereas Cleveland et al.'s (2021) edited book highlights issues concerned with post-3.11 disaster governance and disaster resilience, it focuses on nuclear energy policies rather than cultural aspects.

Koikari's book may also be thought of as an interpretation of Joseph Nye's concept of soft power specific to post-3.11 disaster Japan. Nye (1990) argues that the political use of coercive force (hard power) to assert control across borders has become costly and minimally effective since the Second World War. Governments and political leaders have thus resorted to co-optive power (soft power), whereby they legitimise, and convince others of, their position of power through resources such as media and culture. In subtly operationalising Nye's (1990) concept, Koikari puts forth that the Japanese government has attained much of its domestic control through soft power resources, particularly in relation to post-3.11 disaster resilience-building policies. In raising questions about the morality and ethics behind such methods, especially where children and adolescents are concerned, Koikari indirectly encourages readers to question the extent to which dissidence towards such policies is justifiable.

Overall, this book is a stimulating and perceptive read into the ways in which culture reflects the development of specific governmental policies pertaining to the 3.11 disaster. Non-Japanese-speaking audiences with a tangential knowledge of modern Japanese culture will benefit from the in-text translations provided by Koikari for numerous Japanese slogans, phrases and advertisements.

Academics specialising in Japanese studies, gender studies, disaster studies and cultural studies are offered important insights, and will hopefully apply them to other topics or contexts in their respective fields.

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