

On Gregory Clancey's *Earthquake Nation: The Cultural Politics of Japanese Seismicity, 1868–1930* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 2006)

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Although the seismicity of Japan as a natural phenomenon belongs to the realm of tectonics, perspectives from the history of culture, architecture, and science and technology can problematize the ways in which socio-cultural contexts have formed and transformed the knowledge and technology of earthquakes. In *Earthquake Nation*, Clancey carefully analyzes discourses about Japan's representation as an "earthquake nation" from the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth, investigating how European architecture, Japanese seismicity, knowledge and technology of earthquakes, Japanese carpentry, and cultural politics co-produced one another. His main finding is that the media through which the lithosphere's movements propagated were not monolithic, in that they were situated in geopolitical contexts such as the imperialism and nationalism of the time. I should confess that my own research has been much indebted to his work.

One of the main points of this book concerns the portability of knowledge, from "the West" outward to "the East." As Clancey points out, by the last decades of the nineteenth century, the European knowledge system did not possess a toolbox with which it could aptly handle the endemic problems of earthquakes on Japanese soil. European experts employed by the Japanese government, in this situation, could not provide univocal instructions for the Japanese natives on how to construct buildings strong enough to withstand earthquakes. On the shaking "Asiatic" field, without established answers, the invited representatives of "Western" knowledge and technology exchanged polemical discussions between the proponents of masonry and those of more flexible wooden structures.

According to Clancey, the choice between the "Western" architecture and the "Japanese" variety was something more than a technological decision. Buildings of brick and stone, during the earliest decades of the Meiji period, were represented as

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“strong,” “eternal,” and “male” in nature, representing the European civilization, while traditional Japanese wooden buildings were discussed as their “weak,” “temporary,” and “female” counterparts. Even though sometimes the latter was hailed in terms of the beauty and the skill that the traditional artisans rendered, within the gendered hierarchy of the civilizations it was difficult for the latter to match the foreign system of architecture. Buildings of brick and stone became diplomatic symbols of the “civilizing” Japan.

Thus, the earthquake and its science, in this sense, provided the possibility to reverse the given authority of foreign technology. While European architects and their Japanese pupils continued to argue for the solid foreign masonry, other voices arose on behalf of the earthquake-proof nature of traditional structures, five-story pagodas in particular. Hand-in-hand with Japan’s nationalist turn after the late 1880s, Clancey argues, seismology, a newborn science of earthquakes which was incubated in Japan by European scientists, shared, along with traditional practices of buildings, a vector to refute the claim of superiority for foreign structures. As far as I could understand, it does not seem clear if the ruins of the Great Nōbi Earthquake of 1891 alone played the role of a decisive field test, since the witnesses interpreted in diverse ways what they had seen and heard. Clancey, however, cinematographically offers a discursive canvas upon which discussions of the dreadful earthquake were portrayed: as the collapsed “Western” infrastructures in the devastated areas were visualized against the background of less damaged Japanese castles and mountains, it became harder for the proponents of masonry to keep their previous claims for its pure form. On the other hand, the traditional way of construction, while its practices and history were being transformed, was appropriated into the “modern” landscape of Japan.

Furthermore, beyond the national context, the ability of newly excavated Japan to resist earthquakes could function as a fulcrum to reverse the imperialistic hierarchy of technology. The presumed relative strength of Japanese structures was compared with the “much more fragile” landscape of Italy by Japanese and European scientists. Japanese pagodas and seismographs, symbols of that strength, were displayed abroad through the World Expos. For the Japanese state, which since the 1880s had supported the scientific/engineering quests for an earthquake-proof nation, seismic resistance became a diplomatic tool.

Although the subtitle of this book designates its period from 1868 to 1930, the main storyline of its empirical chapters diminishes around 1910. The only exception is the final chapter, which primarily discusses what happened before and after the Great Kantō Earthquake of 1923. The book’s arrangement, however, which—at least in terms of rhetoric—foregrounds the striking natural events of 1891 and 1923, might lean some readers toward a nature-driven historiography, I am afraid. This I assume would be at odds with what the author intends. Or do the dynamic changes of knowledge-making and its discourses, between the two Great Earthquakes, not matter so much? I would like to add that, in the same way as the outcomes of the contest between the western architects and the “Anglo-Japanese” seismologists were not settled transcendentally, as vividly presented in this book, the territorial claims about earthquake research in Japan, posed by its physicists and seismologists between the two Great Earthquakes were also deployed within the arena of “cultural politics” rather than that of teleological destiny.

I should agree, however, that it makes a thrilling narrative to let the great earthquakes bring about the controversies, and probably this is not so far from the historical “fact.” To most readers, the ways in which the technology and knowledge of Japanese seismicity were discussed up to 1923 might be a less familiar topic than the very striking natural disaster of that year. Nevertheless, a historical vision of how geopolitics and geosciences have co-evolved in the age of empires, which Clancey presents in detail, is highly intriguing and stimulating.