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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

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# From Disaster Solidarity to “Multicultural Conviviality” - Risks and Opportunities for Migrants in Japan after the Great Hanshin Earthquake

**Beniamino Peruzzi Castellani**

*Scuola Normale Superiore*

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper is aimed at contributing to the discussion about practices of solidarity in contexts of shrinking civic space by bringing the focus on Japan. The country is famous for its restrictive migration policies and obstruction of pro-migrant practices. There is, however, a specific societal dimension where solidarity-makers can find spaces and opportunities: that is, the prevention of, and reaction to, natural disasters. The paper is structured in four sections. First, I present an overview of the context and the consequences of the Great Hanshin Earthquake (1995), by focusing on the unprecedented rise of the civil society that followed the disaster. Then, I turn to consider the situation of the migrants living in the Hanshin area at the time of the earthquake, and how they have been at the center of many initiatives of Japanese volunteers and NGOs. In a third section, I argue that, contrary to what is usually predicted by disaster research, those practices of solidarity did not disappear with the end of the emergency, but were progressively institutionalized and reproduced. Finally, I discuss how disaster solidarity has become an engine for the Japanese approach to cultural diversity, that is *tabunka kyōsei* (“multicultural coexistence/conviviality”).

**KEYWORDS:** civil society, disasters, migration, multiculturalism, solidarity

Corresponding author: [beniamino.peruzzi@sns.it](mailto:beniamino.peruzzi@sns.it)

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## Introduction

*Solidarity* is emerging as one of the key concepts in the literature focusing on multiple European crises (Della Porta and Steinhilper, 2021: 1). In this context, practices of solidarity must confront increasingly *shrinking* civic spaces, characterized by various forms of legislative, bureaucratic, and judicial repression, as well as political and social stigmatization. Accordingly, recent scholarship has observed how such practices are shifting towards new forms of expression and looking for different opportunities, re-framing themselves in terms of “contentious solidarity” (*ivi*).

While the literature is mainly concerned with European cases, in this paper I consider the case of Japan. Although it is one of the main destination countries for international migrants in the Asian context, Japan is famous for extremely restrictive migration policies, scarce *recognition* of foreign residents, and obstruction, if not criminalization, of pro-migrant practices. However, within this *shrunk* (more than shrinking) civic space, there is a specific societal dimension where opportunities can be found for solidarity-makers: the prevention of, and reaction to, natural disasters.

Japan is one of the countries most affected by floods, cyclones, volcanic eruptions, and, especially, typhoons, tsunamis, and earthquakes. Hence, in Japan disasters are not extraordinary events; rather, they are incorporated as a relevant feature of socio-cultural life, which has a deep impact on the architecture and infrastructure of cities – as well as on the organization of the whole society. The importance of disaster prevention, and the necessity of practices of cohesion and mutual help after a natural disaster, are uncontested at all social levels, thus providing spaces and opportunities for a dimension of solidarity that we can call *disaster solidarity*.

A rich literature, mainly about the field of disaster research, has shown that natural disaster engenders pro-social behavior and solidarity practices (Oliver-Smith, and Hoffman, 1999; Remes, 2015; Sasse-Zeltner, 2021). However, these situations have been understood as temporary and exceptional *utopian moments* rather than actual opportunities for social change. Moving beyond the Western-centric literature, this paper is aimed at showing how, in Japan, since the tragic Great Hanshin Earthquake in 1995, disaster solidarity has become a major driver of social and political changes. More specifically, it has been a crucial factor in fostering a deep process of rethinking both the presence and the role of migrants in Japanese society.

The paper is structured in four sections. First, I present an overview of the context and the consequences of the Great Hanshin Earthquake, by focusing on certain dynamics that led to an unprecedented rise of the Japanese civil society in the aftermath of the disaster. In the second section, after a brief outline of the history of immigration in Japan, I consider the situation of the migrants living in the Hanshin area at the time of the earthquake, emphasizing how, within the framework of disaster solidarity, they have been at the center of many of the initiatives and interventions of Japanese volunteers and NGOs. Thirdly, I argue that, contrary to what may be expected, the practices related to disaster solidarity that appeared in the aftermath of the earthquake did not disappear with the end of the emergency: rather, they were progressively institutionalized and reproduced, and, eventually, they scaled up from the local/regional level to the national one. Finally, having analyzed how the presence and the role of migrants and cultural diversity have been reconsidered in Japan, I focus on how disaster solidarity has become an engine for the formulation and the official adoption of the Japanese approach to cultural diversity, that is *tabunka kyōsei* (multicultural coexistence/conviviality).

This paper is grounded both on secondary sources in English and Japanese and on semi-structured interviews that I conducted in Osaka with representatives of some of the main civil society organizations created in the aftermath of the earthquake.<sup>1</sup> The paper contributes to this Special Issue by offering insights to the discussion of practices of solidarity in the context of shrinking/shrunk civic space for pro-migrant discourses. By considering how disaster solidarity in Japan has shaped the forms and geography of pro-migrant solidarity at the local level, and has then become a major resource for solidarity makers at the national level, this study challenges the Eurocentrism characterizing much scholarship on crisis and solidarity. Furthermore, in the context of the progressive increase of the scope and intensity of natural disasters and global catastrophes – such as the climate crisis or the recent COVID-19, global pandemic – the analysis of the Japanese case contributes to the wider literature regarding the role and future of local communities.

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<sup>1</sup> Namely: one of the founders of the “Osaka Center for *tabunka kyōsei*”, Tamura Taro; a representative of the Korea Education and Culture Center, Kim Shin Sung; one of the founders of radio FM YY, Shizuyo Yoshitomi.

## 1. The Rising Sun of the Civil Society after the Night of Rubbles

At 5.46 a.m. on January 17<sup>th</sup>, 1995, the southern part of the Hyōgo Prefecture was hit by a 7.3 magnitude earthquake. Although not everyone is familiar with the magnitude scale of an earthquake, seismologists help us grasp the destructive force of such an earthquake by explaining that “a magnitude 7 earthquake has an energy equivalent to around 32 Hiroshima atomic bombs” (Whaley, 2013). Soon labeled by the media as the *Great Hanshin Earthquake*, it was the most devastating natural disaster that hit Japan since the 1923 Great Kantō Earthquake (sadly surpassed in 2011 by the *Great East Japan Earthquake* which triggered the tragic Fukushima nuclear disaster).

The catastrophe severely damaged urban areas on Awaji Island and in the Hanshin (Ōsaka-Kōbe) area, particularly affecting some *ku* (wards) of the city of Kōbe. A total of 6.434 people died, 43.792 were injured, about 105.000 buildings were destroyed and another 144.000 partially destroyed, infrastructures were heavily damaged, and millions of homes in the region remained without electricity or water. Contributing to the scale of the tragedy was a general unpreparedness to face the eventuality of such a disaster, due to the misconception that in the Kansai region, no major earthquakes could have occurred. In fact, compared to other parts of Japan, Kansai had experienced fewer and smaller earthquakes, the major of which dated back some 80 years earlier. Notwithstanding the warnings by some experts emphasizing that the scarcity of even small-scale earthquakes in the area implied a higher probability for a major disaster to occur (Yomiuri Shinbun, 1996: 222-223), general negligence in securing infrastructure and housing characterized Hanshin.

As many later underlined, the reaction of the central government in the aftermath of the disaster was slow and inadequate, and regional and local institutions lacked the equipment and organization to provide effective assistance (Aldrich, 2011: 3; Yamamura, 2013: 7; Pekkansen, 2000: 113-114). At the same time, Japanese authorities showed an astonishing reluctance to accept assistance from foreign countries (Fukushima, 1995). Some suspected that national pride played a part in this attitude, but the greatest obstacle was represented by the complicated Japanese bureaucratic apparatus: the lengthiness, inflexibility, and low capacity for adaptation of the Japanese procedures made it difficult to respond quickly to offers of aid, as well as to allow for a swift reception of medicines and relief personnel.

As a result, it was the Japanese civil society that stood up. In the absence of a prompt and effective response by governmental authorities, those who first acted were the residents themselves, organizing self-evacuation, rescuing neighbors, and fighting against the fires breaking out after the earthquake (Aldrich, 2011: 301; Fukushima, 1995; Shaw and Goda 2004: 21; Watanabe, 1999). For instance, in Nishi Suma (Suma-ku, Kōbe), about 60% of the residents self-evacuated and approximately 20% of the survivors were rescued by their neighbors (Shaw and Goda 2004: 21); and in Mano (Nagata-ku, Kōbe), self-organized civilian fire corps successfully managed to extinguish the post-quake fires (Aldrich, 2011: 5; Watanabe, 1999: 1).

After the immediate rescuing operations, more than 1.000 emergency shelters were organized for evacuees in schools, churches, and temporary housing units (Aldrich, 2011: 3). Initially, a central role was played by local groups and non-governmental organizations, sometimes in cooperation with local governments but often, especially in the first days after the disaster, they acted independently (Shaw and Goda 2004). This was the case, for example, of the shelter organized in the Yasui Elementary School (Nishinomiya city), which was organized and managed by members of the local sports group – later this intervention was recognized by government officials as a best practice of evacuation center management (Watanabe, 1999).

At the same time, some organizations intervened by making up for institutional shortcomings in the distribution of food, water, and other first aid items and forms of support. In particular, many religious organizations and groups with a strong influence in the Hanshin area – such as the Salvation Army, Konkokyo, Soka Gakkai, and Tenrikyo – activated their networks to effectively gather and distribute relief supplies. Even the ruthless *yakuza* group Yamaguchi-gumi, the largest and most powerful criminal organization in Japan whose general headquarters are in Kōbe, immediately intervened in support of the survivors: in response to the tardy and inefficient governmental reaction, the gangsters resolved to organize a daily distribution of food, oil heaters, and other goods, “until the Government can handle it” (Sterngold, 1995).

Of course, all these cases – especially the latter – were particularly embarrassing for the Japanese government and were rarely reported in the Japanese media.

Many enterprises and companies concurred with such privatization of the relief efforts. Among the main ones, the supermarket chain Daiei (whose general administration is based in Kōbe), the chain of retail convenience stores Seven-Eleven, the Consumer's Co-operative Co-op Kōbe, and the Kōbe-based food company Awajiya Corporation, strove to grant the supply and distribution of food and first-aid items; Nintendo and Sega offered electronic and board games to the children of displaced families, and NTT and Motorola provided free telephone services. Later on, employees from electric and gas companies in other regions were sent on-site to assist in the reconstruction of the infrastructures. Finally, a major role was played by the media: famous entertainers, personalities, and cultural figures who were variously connected with the Kansai region contributed to the nationwide dissemination of calls for help and donations.

However, a crucial aspect of the wave of solidarity that rose in Japan in the aftermath of the earthquake was the intervention of volunteers. This phenomenon was unprecedented both in relation to the numbers and the identities of those who participated as volunteers. Firstly, an estimated 1.8 million people rushed to the affected areas offering their help both in the relief and reconstruction phases.<sup>2</sup> Secondly, while in the past Japanese volunteerism was closely associated with social movements leaning towards clear goals of social change, and, therefore, it was characterized as a political action and associated with specific political positions, the earthquake triggered the emergence of a new dimension of volunteerism in Japan. Indeed, many of those who rushed to the affected area had never acted as volunteers in the past and resolved to go “because the body just moved” (Watanabe, 1999: 193, my translation).

As a result, a new “community” of Japanese volunteers was born, for whom volunteering was conceived as an “immediate act” (*ibid.*), and both government officials and public opinion realized the crucial role of volunteer activities. Due to these relevant changes, 1995 has been famously labeled as the Japanese “First Year of Volunteerism” (*borantia gannen*) (Tatsuki, 2000). The government later designed the day of the earthquake (January 17) as the *Disaster Prevention and Volunteer Day*, the pivot around which the *Disaster Prevention and Volunteer Week* revolves. The extraordinary volunteer phenomenon of 1995 has been attributed to several factors. The severity of the disaster, the ineffectiveness of institutional reaction, and the intense media coverage clearly contributed to eliciting the volunteering (Tierney and Goltz, 1997: 3). At the same time, demographic factors played a role: the 1995 volunteer movement could count on the large number of young people born in the second Japanese baby boom (1971-74), by then in their twenties and mostly university students. Considering that the earthquake occurred during a break between academic terms, it was particularly easy for these students to join the ranks of the volunteers.

In this same context of disaster and civil society mobilization, another social revolution was about to occur in Japan. For the first time, issues related to the presence and role of migrants in local communities came to the forefront. It was immediately obvious that this category of victims was in a particularly vulnerable position, mainly because of cultural differences and language barriers. At the same time, insofar as they were members of the local community, it was necessary to seek their cooperation in the context of the disaster. As a result, in the aftermath of the earthquake, urgent questions arose about how Japanese and foreigners were to join forces as members of the same community.

## 2. Foreigners in the Earthquake and Disaster Solidarity

Until the end of the 1960s, Japan was not a land for immigrants. While the isolationist foreign policy known as *sakoku* (chained/secluded country) enforced in the Tokugawa period (1603-1868) was forcibly put to an end in 1865 by Western powers, its ideological narrative was still reflected in an extremely restrictive migration policy. Even during its modernization and industrialization – with the only exception of the forced recruitment of workers from colonies in Korea and China during the experience of Imperial Japan (1868-1945) – the supply for low-wage labor was mainly represented by native rural migrants (Douglass and Roberts, 2000: 5). At the same time, in the aftermath of WWII the devastated

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<sup>2</sup> [https://www.bousai.go.jp/kyoiku/kyokun/hanshin\\_awaji/data/detail/2-4-1.html](https://www.bousai.go.jp/kyoiku/kyokun/hanshin_awaji/data/detail/2-4-1.html)

country did not seem to be by any means an appealing destination for international migrants. Accordingly, within the context of international migration, for decades Japan was rather an exporter of low-wage migrants, mainly directed to South America due to active recruitment channels and strategic interests (Endoh, 2009).

However, at the beginning of the 1970s, the situation started to change. The first reversal in the Japanese migration trend was the recruitment of women from other Asian countries into Japan's domestic sex industry. Moreover, since the end of the Vietnam War (1955-1975), Japan started receiving Indochinese refugees from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, accepting about 10.000 people. This opening to humanitarian migration progressively led Japan to sign the Refugee Convention in 1981 which, in turn, required a series of revisions of social security laws concerning the treatment of foreign residents in Japan (Kondo, 2002).

These first changes were combined with new pressures from the labor market that were naturally resulting from the Japanese economic bubble of 1986-1991: it was clear by then that new demands for performing the so-called 3K jobs – i.e., *kitanai* (dirty), *kiken* (dangerous), *kitsui* (demanding) – could no longer be met by supplies from rural Japan which, by that time, had already been decimated by the massive urbanization. It was at this point that stable migration flows toward Japan, especially from Asian and Middle Eastern countries, started to form. Eventually, in 1989 the Japanese government resolved to begin a process of revision of its immigration laws: the Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act which came into force in 1990 paved the way for the transformation of Japan into an immigration country.

These new reforms were specifically targeting the communities that were created by Japanese emigrants in the previous decades: according to the new laws, the so-called *nikkeijin* (foreigners of Japanese descent) were granted, until the third generation, a renewable quasi-permanent residence status allowing to work without restriction. This was, of course, an ideal attempt – ultimately motivated by racial and ethnic concerns – to continue the tradition of meeting shortages in labor demands through (an at least ethnically) Japanese labor supply. Thus, while opening the doors to *nikkeijin* by means of the new immigration policy, on the other side the government attempted to stop the increasing flows of other categories of immigrants: accordingly, bilateral visa waivers stipulated with some countries in the past (e.g., with Bangladesh, Iran, and Pakistan) were abolished, and much stricter controls over categories of migrants other than *nikkeijin* were prescribed (Douglass and Roberts, 2000: 6).

However, things did not proceed according to the ideal plan. The immediate effect of the reforms was, of course, that some hundred thousand migrants of Japanese descent rushed to the country of their ancestors. Most of these return migrants were coming from Brazil (about 134.000),<sup>3</sup> a country which over time had become home to the world's biggest *nikkeijin* community. In fact, in the 1990s, for members of this community, the incentives to migrate to Japan perfectly aligned with a significant push factor represented by the severe economic crisis that was afflicting the South American country in those years (Tsuda, 1999).

However, the reality soon shattered the naïve expectations that a shared racial descent could be a basis for cultural commonalities. Indeed, many second and, even more, third-generation *nikkeijin*, except for some physiognomic characteristics, were understandably genuine Brazilians, both linguistically and culturally. Considering the immense distance between the Japanese and the Brazilian culture, this was quite a hoax for the original intention of the government: instead of bringing back overseas compatriots, depicted as not substantially different from Japanese nationals who happened to spend time abroad, Japan suddenly found itself committed to managing issues of hundreds of thousands of Brazilian quasi-permanent residents, whose presence was also seriously putting into question the traditional assumptions over Japanese race and ethnicity (Tsuda, 2003). At the same time, notwithstanding the legal tightening of requirements for non-*nikkeijin* migrants, the number of entries from countries such as China, Korea, and the Philippines continued to increase (Douglass and Roberts, 2000: 7).

By 1995, Japan was, willy-nilly, a country of immigration and cultural and linguistic diversity. Nevertheless, the dominant narrative continued undaunted to claim otherwise, and both foreigners and minorities had almost no visibility in Japanese mainstream society. However, when the earthquake struck, it unveiled and exposed the seriousness and the

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.stat.go.jp/english/data/kokusei/1995/1518.html>.

tragic consequences of the Japanese neglect of the foreign presence. This was, in particular, connected to the uniqueness of the affected area in relation to the foreign presence, whose long history dates back to the opening of the port of Kōbe to foreign trade in 1868. Since that time, the foreign presence continued to grow, attracted also by the progressive transformation of the port of Ōsaka into the main international port of Japan, and the centrality of the area for Japanese trade and business. Thus, Hanshin was (and still is) one of the areas with the highest concentration of foreign residents in Japan.

At the time of the catastrophe, the affected area was specifically characterized by the presence of oldcomer migrants – the so-called *zainichi* (literally meaning: in Japan) – often subjected to various forms of discrimination and ghettoization. In particular, these were families and descendants of those Koreans who had been coercively recruited in pre-war times from the former Japanese colonies and who lived in high concentrations in Nagata-ku (Kōbe). Along with them, the disaster area was home to about 80.000 newcomers, including Chinese, South American *nikkeijin*, Vietnamese refugees, Americans, Indians, and a number of foreign students of different backgrounds (Suzuki, 2013). A total of 174 foreigners lost their lives in the disaster, and many were injured, while, at the same time, tens of thousands were in panic and confusion, not fully understanding what was going on and not having a clear discernment of what to do (Shizuyo, 2012; Tamura, 2000).

It was in this context that the language and cultural barriers, together with the *invisibility* of foreigners risked revealing their full frightening and tragic scope. Amidst the general unpreparedness of the governmental institution in relation to the response to the earthquake, officials had even fewer clues – if any – about how to support people who were not fluent in Japanese, nor how to manage other possible issues related to cultural diversity. Once again, it was the civil society that promptly intervened. Considering the vulnerability of foreigners in the aftermath of the earthquake, in the wave of solidarity that followed the catastrophe many efforts were directed towards the assistance of this category of victims.

Of course, the fact that the Hanshin area had been characterized by a long multicultural history, and that, over time, relations between foreign groups and Japanese had been created and consolidated, played a crucial role in this sense. In fact, what happened in this context was yet another proof of the well-known “strength of weak ties” (Granovetter, 1973): it was thanks to the links between Japanese and foreigners, as well as among their own communities, that it became possible to take action. Japanese natives who had been involved with foreigners before the earthquake connected with each other, and, in cooperation with some foreigners who could speak Japanese, formed groups and networks of volunteers in order, first of all, to spread relevant information in multiple languages.

After the first few days, many of these groups which were urgently and informally created as a reaction to the emergency, acquired a more stable and institutional structure. Fueled by the unprecedented arrival of volunteers and donations, they could continue in their efforts to reach, and provide assistance to foreign victims. In this way, either in cooperation with, or at least with the tacit approval of, officials of the local and regional government, a wide variety of services was organized and developed in the mid-/long-term, aimed at systematically empowering foreigners and fostering their active participation both in the relief and reconstruction phase.

In this context, a well-known case was the Foreigners' Earthquake Information Center, which, as will be discussed in the next section, played a relevant role in the diffusion of a focus on cultural diversity in Japan. Established by a group of volunteers only five days after the disaster, the center provided hotline consultation services in 15 languages, and multilingual information, such as bulletins containing official government announcements regarding services, the condolence fund, financial assistance, and other programs. Two other similar organizations, which were set up in Nagata-ku at that time, were the Center of Recovery of Life for Foreigners Living in Hyōgo and the Group of Communication of Vietnamese Victims' Rescue, whose office was based in the Takatori Catholic Church, which had always been one of the main points of reference for the Vietnamese migrants living in the area. At the same time, the Kōbe Students and Youth Center distributed 30.000 yen in cash to every foreign student whose residential building had been totally or partially destroyed (Takezawa, 2000: 90).

Another very successful experience was that of multilingual pirate radios, the most famous of which were the FM Yoboseyo (Korean expression meaning “hello”), which was managed by *zainichi* Koreans, and the FM Yumen (Vietnamese word meaning “Friendship”), launched subsequently by Vietnamese migrants. The Korean pirate radio was

created by a group of *zainichi* activists from Ikuno-ku (Ōsaka) – one of the areas with the highest concentration of *zainichi* Korean residents – where they had already been managing the radio station FM Sarang (meaning “love” in Korean). The aim of the new mini-radio, which broadcasted in Korean and Japanese, was to provide information in support of *zainichi* victims of the earthquake.

Notice that, among the factors animating this intervention – but the same can be said about similar solidarity initiatives towards Koreans and minorities – there was declaredly some trepidation in relation to the collective memory of the massacre of many Koreans in the aftermath of the Great Kantō Earthquake that hit Tokyo in 1923. At that time, in addition to the unprecedented hecatomb caused by the earthquake and the subsequent fires, no less than 6.000 Koreans were killed by the Japanese, under absurd and unmotivated accusations of being responsible for intentional arson and water poisoning (Ryang, 2003). This is why the need to disseminate correct information and deflate discord and intergroup prejudices was deemed of great importance (Kim, 2012; Yamanaka, 2011).

Shortly after starting its broadcasting, the group of FM Yobosayo became aware of the precarious situation of some Vietnamese migrants who, due to language and cultural barriers, were experiencing daily tensions and friction with the Japanese with whom they were sharing the shelter. Thus, they got in touch with Reverend Hiroshi Kanda, the priest of Takatori Catholic Church who was involved in the above-mentioned organization in support of Vietnamese victims, offering their support for the creation of another pirate radio, which could provide multilingual information to Vietnamese and other non-Japanese speakers. The radio started broadcasting about two months after the day of the disaster (on March 28, 1995), and reported on experiences, issues, and useful information mainly in Vietnamese, Tagalog, and Spanish.

All the above-mentioned organizations, together with some others, progressively joined together to form the Network for Foreigners' Assistance. This umbrella organization intervened in the distribution of disaster condolence allowances to the bereaved: while the government had included long-term migrant residents and permanent residents in the ordinance for an allowance of 5 million yen for the death of breadwinners and 2 million yen for the death of dependents, the Ministry of Welfare had explicitly excluded from this fund both short-term sojourners and overstayers (Takezawa, 2000: 90). The same applied also to medical care: while everyone else, regardless of status, was recognized the right to receive totally free medical care, since these two categories of migrants were not eligible to join government medical insurance, they were required to cover all their medical expenses. The Network for Relief of Foreigners stepped in offering, on the one side, 1 million yen out of donations to bereaved foreigners officially ineligible for the condolence fund, and, on the other side, lobbied until the prefectural government was convinced to cover the medical costs of the foreigners excluded by the national initiative.

Through all these remarkable efforts and initiatives, the Japanese civil society – especially volunteers and NGOs – crucially complemented the governmental response to the earthquake, often making up for its shortcomings, delays, and inefficiencies. Thanks to these prompt, dynamic, and spontaneous interventions, for the first time the Japanese society properly recognized the need to include foreigners and minorities as equal members of the same community. Of course, this almost idyllic participative and inclusive Japan is something that ought to be understood in the context of the catastrophe. The unprecedented and all-encompassing solidarity in the aftermath of the Great Hanshin Earthquake is yet another example of what we could call *disaster solidarity*, i.e., an uncontested sudden wave of sympathy and empathy for others, typical of – and mostly limited to – situation of collective disaster. However, disaster solidarity in Japan proved to be much less ephemeral and circumstantial than what could have been expected.

### 3. Institutionalizing Disaster Solidarity

A vast amount of literature has convincingly demonstrated that catastrophes and natural disasters trigger pro-social behavior, cooperation, and solidarity practices (Oliver-Smith, and Hoffman, 1999; Remes, 2015; Sasse-Zeltner, 2021). The peculiarity of the situation resulting from disaster solidarity has been famously described in terms of a “disaster utopia” (Solnit, 2010). However, disaster researchers agree that such a situation is a temporary phenomenon, doomed to progressively disappear with the return to normal: the extraordinary inclusive, and close-knit community soon dissolves, just as quickly as it appeared. While this argument is grounded in robust literature, it has been recognized that most studies

concern exclusively Western societies, especially the US (Sasse-Zeltner, 2021: 164). Accordingly, this study of Japanese disaster solidarity contributes to challenging the possibility of generalizing those Western-centric findings to other settings.

Within the context of disaster-prone countries, Japan represents a quite peculiar case, due to its geographical and geological coordinates. First of all, the country is subject to extreme climatic variations, such as seasonal rain fronts and typhoons, as well as heavy snowfalls in its northern and northeastern territories. Moreover, the topography is rugged and irregular, characterized by the presence of faults and steep inclines. Finally, the archipelago is located right into the so-called *Ring of Fire*, a string of volcanoes and sites of seismic activity, stretching around the edges of the Pacific Ocean. Accordingly, along with floods, cyclones, and typhoons, Japan is affected by volcanic eruptions (its 83 active volcanoes account for one-tenth of the world total), and, particularly, tsunamis, and earthquakes.

For these reasons, understandably, disasters cannot be considered extraordinary events in Japan: rather, they have been progressively incorporated as a relevant feature of the socio-cultural life, deeply impacting the architecture and infrastructure of cities – as well as the organization of the whole society. In this sense, contrary to what could be expected in some other contexts where natural disasters were considered quite exceptional phenomena, disaster solidarity in Japan has a unique potential to trigger real long-term social changes.

This is precisely the case of the disaster solidarity that emerged in 1995, which marked a crucial turning point in the role both of Japanese civil society and of migrants and minorities in Japan. In fact, most of the solidarity practices that appeared in the aftermath of the earthquake did not dissolve but were rather promoted, institutionalized in the long term, and reproduced. In addition to that, some of the changes that were introduced scaled up from the local and regional levels to reach the national government.

Firstly, most of the informal groups and networks that were set in place during the relief phase, while undergoing some transformations, continued to carry on their activities progressively becoming official organizations. For instance, the Center of Recovery of Life for Foreigners Living in Hyōgo and the Group of Communication of Vietnamese Victims' Rescue were eventually unified, inaugurating in 1997 the still active Kōbe Foreigners Friendship Center (KFC). In a similar vein, FM Yobosayo and FM Yumen merged in 1996 launching the new FM YY.<sup>4</sup> With the support of the local and regional government, which recognized how much the previous broadcasting of the two pirate-radios had contributed to the local community during the emergency, the new radio easily obtained an official license for broadcasting. The headquarters of the radio remained the Takatori Catholic Church, within which, in the meanwhile, other groups and organizations aimed at the promotion of social inclusion and community building had gathered. In 2000, nine of these organizations joined forces and created the still active umbrella NPO known as Takatori Community Center.

Furthermore, the unprecedented mobilization of civil society in 1995 soon revealed the potential to exert impact way above individual groups' and organizations' relatively narrow scope of action. To overcome some idiosyncrasies concerning the relation with governmental institutions, the networks of NGOs born in post-quake Hanshin resolved to organize together with government officials an informal regular working group named GONGO (an acronym for Government Organizations and Non-Government Organizations): this became an important space for the organized civil society to exert pressure to the local and regional governments.

The impact of this movement soon went way beyond the regional level, scaling up to reach the very national government and crucially reshaping the previous state-civil society relations. Strongly supported by the media, by leveraging the enthusiasm raised in the volunteer year and insisting on the incontrovertible role that nongovernmental organizations and citizens' groups had played in the relief phase, civil society became the main driver for the formulation of the 1998 *NPO Law* (Pekkanen, 2000). This law has been widely recognized as a revolution in Japanese civil activism and as a shift in the state-society power balance: indeed, not only did it allow for thousands of civil society groups to acquire the legal status of Non-Profit Organization, but it also considerably lightened the bureaucratic burdens that used to weight on these organizations, as well as it released them from the heavy-handed official supervision and control – characteristic of the narrative of the Japanese “strong state” (*ivi*: 112) – which had affected them in the past.

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<sup>4</sup> The name is derived from the initials of the two previous radios - “Yoboseyo” and “Yumen.”



At the same time, disaster solidarity in 1995 underlined the need to include migrants and cultural minorities in the institutional strategies of disaster management, by seriously putting into question previous frameworks and reformulating them. Indeed, it became clear that, in the absence of appropriate countermeasures, foreigners would become an extremely vulnerable category in the context of a disaster. In this way, the need to preventively intervene to empower foreigners enabling them to face disaster scenarios emerged as an incontrovertible urgent matter, i.e., literally, a matter of life and death not only for themselves but also for the rest of their local communities. In fact, only when foreigners reach a basic level of self-help, do they also become able to properly perform mutual help and, thus, actively participate in the rescue and relief phase.

The vulnerability of many foreigners in the context of disasters is connected to the dimension of communication. In this sense, four concurring and overlapping aspects can be identified, on which researchers have focused the attention building upon the experience of the Great Hanshin Earthquake: namely, 1) language barriers, 2) cultural differences, 3) gaps in *stock information*, and 4) lack of contact and safety networks. Among these four points, the issue of language, which is an essential precondition for effective communication, has been understandably given a major focus.

The most obvious way to address language barriers consists of the systematic multilingual translation of crucial information, as concerns both the procedure to follow during the rescue phase and the updates of the situation in the subsequent relief phase. However, multilingual translations are not always the best option: indeed, sometimes either time or resources do not allow for translation; moreover, many foreigners do have basic/intermediate competencies in Japanese and can recognize simple daily life words.

Thus, starting with an extensive study on communication failures during the Great Hanshin Earthquake, the Sociolinguistic Laboratory at Hirosaki University led by Kazuyuki Sato has both elaborated and started testing an alternative solution to overcome linguistic barriers: that is, the *yasashii nihongo* (easy/gentle Japanese). This artificial language is a variation of standard Japanese in which simpler grammatical structures and easier and statistically more recognizable words are used.

In fact, official announcements and reports in Japan, even in case of emergency, always recur to the polite and more complicated version of Japanese, avoiding the simpler and more direct imperative. This is due, on the one side, to the fact that the imperative form is considered rude and, in general, not appropriate for communication; on the other side, and most importantly, the use of the imperative transforms the announcement in an official order, which, according to the law, bears legal consequences in case one fails to obey it (Yamashita, 2013). For these reasons, even an evacuation announcement is usually formulated as something that in English could be phrased as "If you please, it may well be appropriate to evacuate," instead of "Evacuate!"

Besides the complexity of the language structure in the context of disasters, official communications also use quite complicated technical words. As a result, the proposal of the *yasashii nihongo* represents an alternative certified and more inclusive linguistic framework to be used in the context of disasters. Of course, it can be used in the same way also as a written language, by avoiding difficult *kanji* (Japanese characters) and mainly using *hiragana* (Japanese phonetical alphabet) and *furigana* (phonetic characters added in the text to help read the non-phonetic characters). The first result of the efforts of the Sociolinguistic Laboratory was the *Manual for Helping Foreigners in the Event of a Disaster*, published by the Hirosaki University in 1999.

In some respects, some issues due to cultural differences may overlap with those related to language barriers. This is the case, for example, of specific social meanings associated with language expressions and language structure. Moreover, by taking into account the specific points of view informed by different cultural frameworks, it becomes possible to unveil some previous communication biases: for instance, as concerns evacuation maps, contrary to the intuitive opinion that literal translation could represent the best practice, it was shown that for some cultures used to identify locations through street names, the Japanese maps, also when translated, remained particularly difficult. Finally, a specific focus on this aspect allowed for a reconsideration of some other needs of specific categories of migrants, particularly those concerning food.

Stock information consists of those details concerning standard procedures in case of disaster which represent an integral part of disaster prevention – to the contrary, *flow information* is communicated in real-time in the context of a

disaster. While flow information is subject to strong pressures dictated by emergency and contingent and unforeseen factors, it is critical to strategically make stock information inclusive and accessible. Notice that stock information is relevant not only during the rescuing phase (e.g., in order to know the location of the emergency shelter), but also during the relief phase. For instance, information related to the time of distribution of food and the quantity of relief supplies may significantly alleviate the anxiety of the situation and may lower levels of tension in intergroup interactions: indeed, it happened that, finding supplies under a sign with written “Please feel free to take,” some foreigners took in, hand over fist, for family and friends, under the stunned and irritated gazes of the Japanese who took only what immediately needed, knowing that more would have been delivered at a designated time (Tamura, 2017).

Accordingly, on the one hand, both language barriers and cultural differences need to be taken into account in order to create inclusive content for stock information. On the other hand, efforts must be made to promote it and make it accessible to foreigners, through various forms of distribution (online, in the context of bureaucratic procedures, or through the workplace, and so forth).

Finally, both quantitative and qualitative studies in the aftermath of the disaster of 1995 have demonstrated that the presence of ties in the local community and the active participation in local networks is closely related to the capability to respond to disasters. Therefore, the possibility of properly including migrants in the extraordinary community of the disaster utopia seems to be grounded in their inclusion in the local community *tout court*.

All the findings of this process of reformulation of disaster management were progressively institutionalized through both revisions of the related national policies – particularly the revision of the Disaster Countermeasures Basic Act – and the formulation and implementation of programs, strategies, and initiatives at the regional and local level. However, the effect of the experience of disaster solidarity was not exhausted in this institutionalization of devices and practices aimed at including migrants and minorities in the framework of disaster management: in fact, what is more important, disaster solidarity became a driver for the recognition of cultural and ethnic minorities as members of local communities in Japan, and, thus, more in general, for a deep rethinking their role in the Japanese society.

#### **4. “We Shall Build Bonds So Strong that No Earthquakes May Ever Defeat”<sup>5</sup>**

In a particularly disaster-prone country such as Japan, disaster solidarity and the disaster-related discourse have a unique potential to influence the mainstream of Japanese political and social thought. This is even more so in the context of a progressive shared realization that, together with migration and tourist flows, the scale and frequency of natural disasters have been increasing in recent years at the national level (Kataoka, 2016).

Accordingly, from the rethinking of the position of foreigners in disaster management, two aspects gradually but persistently emerged and propelled a sort of *Copernican revolution* in the relations between Japanese society and the presence of foreign immigrants and cultural minorities: first, the fact that the inclusion of foreigners in the receiving end of disaster management paved the way towards a serious reconsideration of their role as active participants both in the rescue and reconstruction phase; second, the recognition that the mainstreaming of a foreigner-centered inclusive lens represented a new resource and opportunity to address issues that were crucial not only to non-Japanese but also to the whole Japanese society.

Firstly, the natural implication of the empowerment of foreigners in the disaster context is the possibility for them to be included and participate in the process of construction of the disaster utopia. Already in the context of the Great Hanshin Earthquake, the role of some foreigners as language and cultural mediators allowed supporting other victims. Moreover, since migrants’ age tends to range in the 25-50 age group,<sup>6</sup> they can become an extremely precious human resource in the context of Japan’s aging society.

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<sup>5</sup> Verse from the song *Shiawase hakoeru yō ni* (“So that Happiness Can Be Carried”) composed by Makoto Usui in 1995, dedicated to the victims of the earthquake (my translation). From January 17, 2021, the song has become Kōbe’s city anthem.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/693035/immigrant-stock-of-japan-by-age/>

Therefore, many disaster prevention initiatives, especially in municipalities with a large number of foreign residents, were progressively redirected towards the empowerment of foreigners' leadership and their training as "foreign disaster supporters" and "(disaster) community leaders" (Kataoka, 2009; Shizuyo, 2019; Takezawa, 2000; Tamura, 2020). Moreover, a lively debate recently raised the possibility of including foreigners in official firefighting corps. Some local governments remained skeptical on the matter, judging Japanese citizenship as a basic requirement for firefighters: indeed, since firefighters are part-time special local public officials doubts have been raised about the legal possibility of allowing foreigners to exercise public authority – moreover, it was argued that some Japanese citizens would not feel at ease in following official instructions given by foreigners (Tamura, 2017). However, the Fire and Disaster Management Agency of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications has taken a positive stance on the possibility of accepting foreign nationals as firefighters, allowing them to exert public authority under the command of Japanese nationals (*ivi*). Accordingly, some experiments have begun in this respect at the local level (Tamura, 2020).

The second crucial element is the transformative potential of *mainstreaming*: overcoming the traditional distinction between migrants and citizens and promoting policies and practices of disaster management targeting the entire population instead of specific groups. This aspect is connected with the recognition that some categories of Japanese nationals may be characterized by the same vulnerabilities as foreigners, which can be efficiently addressed in the same ways. More specifically, the discussion of disaster management considering the four aspects discussed in the previous section became a way to properly refocus on the issues of similarly disadvantaged minorities within the majority group of Japanese natives.

Firstly, linguistic barriers do not affect only non-native Japanese speakers: the technicalities of the standard Japanese used in disaster contexts may represent an issue also for the elderly, for people with disabilities, for members of Japanese sub-cultures (such as internal migrants speaking different dialects), and for children. In this respect, the use of *yasashii nihongo* proved extremely useful in promoting a more inclusive dissemination of information also for these native Japanese minorities. In the same vein, the discussion about cultural differences has been connected to a general renewed attention to some features, such as food, which may be relevant to those same minorities – this became an opportunity to put a special focus on issues connected to allergies and vegetarianism concerning the whole Japanese population.

Moreover, the accessibility of stock information is a matter of paramount importance also for the Japanese population, most of all when considering the ever-increasing phenomenon of internal migration. This very phenomenon is closely connected with community ties and participation in local networks. By now, it is clear that foreigners are not the only alien category of residents in Japanese neighborhoods. In this sense, the focus on including foreigners at the micro level connects with the general contemporary issue of building networks and ties and promoting participation in the dynamic and *fluid* local communities of contemporary Japan.

The full extent of the social and political revolution driven by disaster solidarity in Japan can be more properly grasped once we consider the ultimate scope of this process of recognition and incorporation of the presence and role of migrants and minorities in Japanese society: that is, the beginning of the age of multiculturalism and cultural diversity in Japan. In fact, it was precisely in the progressive institutionalization of the practices of disaster solidarities inaugurated in 1995, as well as in the discussion that accompanied it at various levels, that Japan formulated and adopted its approach to cultural diversity, known as *tabunka kyōsei* (multicultural coexistence/conviviality). The expression refers to the recognition of the fact that Japan is a multicultural country, and to the need to promote policies, strategies, and initiatives in order to allow different cultural groups to live peacefully together as members of the Japanese society.

It is not clear when exactly the Japanese concept of *tabunka kyōsei* started to be used. The anthropologist Yasuko Takezawa claims that the first recurrence of the expression in an official publication dates back to an article in the newspaper *Mainichi Shimbun*, referring to a conference held in Kawasaki in 1993 (Takezawa 2009: 89-90; 2011: 14). In that same year, the Kawasaki municipal council formulated the *Kawasaki New Era 2010 Plan*, which, among its principles, listed the "promotion of the creation of a city of *tabunka kyōsei*" (Kato 2008: 23, my translation). However, it has been widely recognized that it is in the context of the Great Hanshin Earthquake that the expression was popularized, and the concept was properly formulated.

In fact, the ideal of *tabunka kyōsei* was adopted by many of the grassroots initiatives that originated in the aftermath of the disaster, and properly conceived as the *manifesto* for the recognition of foreigners' presence and role in Japanese society. For instance, during the relief phase, the above-mentioned Foreigners' Earthquake Information Center was famously renamed the Osaka Center for *Tabunka Kyōsei*." Following this example, during the process of rethinking the strategies for the inclusion of their foreign population, many municipalities and regional governments in Japan created their own Centers for *Tabunka Kyōsei*, both at prefectural and municipal levels.

In this way, the ideal of *tabunka kyōsei* spread all over the countries, firstly employed in connection to plans for cultural diversity governance at the level of local administration, and then, in 2005, officially adopted by the central government. Indeed, in that year, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (MIC) established the Study Group on the Promotion of *Tabunka Kyōsei*, which, in 2006, submitted its report *Toward the Promotion of Tabunka Kyōsei in Local Communities*. Building upon the conclusions of the report, in that same year, the MIC formulated its *Regional Plan for the Promotion of Tabunka Kyōsei*, which became the national conceptual and political framework for the diffusion of policies related to multicultural coexistence to be implemented at the local level. Unsurprisingly, a major focus was given to the issues related to the inclusion of foreigners in disaster management.

It is fair to say that, from that moment the concept of *tabunka kyōsei* was normalized and started to be used to refer, in general, to policies and initiatives concerning migrants. However, many criticisms have been raised against the largely rhetoric and generalist scope of most of this institutional enthusiasm, often pointing at the distance between the narrative of *tabunka kyōsei* and the Western theory of multiculturalism (e.g., Tayaka 2007: 48; Lee and Olsen, 2015: 12-13; Suzuki, 2013: 20). Criticisms similar to those raised against *tabunka kyōsei* can be found also in the Western debate about multiculturalism. However, multiculturalism developed into a fully-fledged political theory, ultimately grounded on the assumption that culture is to be acknowledged as a value. The same cannot be said for *tabunka kyōsei*, which does not, *per se*, imply any theoretical commitment whatsoever, except the recognition that Japan has become home to a plurality of cultures due to contemporary migration and that cultural diversity needs to be managed. Indeed, contrary to the official vision of Japan as a society of *multicultural conviviality*, the systematic repression of diversity and discrimination of minorities still informs immigration policies and Japan's political and social apparatus more broadly – not to mention some discriminatory idiosyncrasies typical of some of its cultural traditions and customs.

Therefore, contrary to multiculturalism, *tabunka kyōsei* did not immediately connect with the struggles of minorities for recognition and rights. Moreover, since the approach refers exclusively to migration governance, Japan could not easily engage with recent developments in the Western debate, such as the reconceptualization of diversity in terms of "super-diversity," which includes diversity categories other than the traditional ones of ethnicity and nationality (such as gender, social class, etc.). Nevertheless, some attempts to reformulate and give more normative grounding to *tabunka kyōsei* have been emerging at the local level: for example, the city of Hamamatsu, at least since the publication in 2013 of the *Hamamatsu Vision for Tabunka Kyōsei*, has been embracing an ideal of multicultural conviviality based on the recognition that cultural diversity represents a value for society.

Besides opening this path, disaster solidarity is still playing a major role in guiding the development of the debate concerning cultural diversity governance, including the attempts to rethink the concept of *tabunka kyōsei*. Notwithstanding the general repression of spaces for pro-migrant and pro-inclusion solidarity, the need to promote social inclusion and cohesion in local communities through disaster prevention is uncontested and ever-urgent in disaster-prone Japan. Moreover, as seen above, disaster solidarity has been leading to mainstreaming disaster-related policies and practices, thus contributing to overcoming the traditional narrative differentiating migrants from natives and providing opportunities for a wider rethinking of migrant-related policies. In other words, disaster solidarity has been representing one of the main engines of Japanese multiculturalism: by building upon, and leveraging on, the dimension of disaster management, both the civil society and local government have been able to generate substantial innovations and practices regarding the recognition and promotion of social inclusion and cultural diversity.

The concrete results of this process can be observed, on the one hand, in civil society initiatives and in everyday practices of community-building which, drawing from the experience of the Great Hanshin Earthquake, have been spreading at the local level all over Japan. On the other hand, the success of the institutionalization of disaster solidarity

has been underlined by the improvements in both the institutional and the civil society responses to disasters that have been observed in subsequent catastrophes. This has been clearly revealed especially in the case of the tremendous Great East Earthquake in 2011: in this context, the intervention of Japanese civil society drew directly from the experience of the disaster of 1995, by reproducing – with the support of still existing Hanshin networks and organizations – some of the best practices of disaster response, and by witnessing an unprecedented active participation of foreign nationals as volunteers and supporters (Suzuki, 2013).

Everything seems to suggest that disaster solidarity will continue to represent a major driver of social and political change in Japan, as it points towards the possibility of an inclusive, cohesive, and diverse local community even in contexts of general repression of civil space for solidarity. While threats of tremendous natural disasters are increasingly becoming the rule rather than the exception, and the existence of cohesive local communities is threatened by the unstoppable fluidity and dynamism of the resident population, disaster solidarity continues to sustain the possibility of building – as goes a famous song dedicated to the victims of the Great Hanshin Earthquake – “bonds so strong that no Earthquakes may ever defeat.”

## Concluding Remarks

By focusing on the context and consequences of the Great Hanshin Earthquake of 1995, this paper has analyzed how disaster solidarity emerges as a major driver of social and political changes in Japan. On the one side, the unprecedented mobilization of volunteers and NGOs in the aftermath of the disaster – which inaugurated the so-called *First Year of Volunteerism* – has resulted in a crucial reformulation of the relations between state and civil society in Japan. On the other side, the rise of solidarity has brought renewed attention to the presence of migrants in Japanese society, and, in particular, to their vulnerability in the context of disasters, fostering a deep process of rethinking their role as members of local Japanese communities in the direction of recognition, redistribution, and participation.

Thus, contrary to what has been argued by many studies on the topic focusing on Western cases, in Japan disaster solidarity did not dissolve with the end of the emergency. In fact, most of the initiatives and discourses introduced in the post-quake Hanshin area were progressively institutionalized, eventually scaling up from the local/regional level to the national one. It was in this process that *tabunka kyōsei* was formulated as the Japanese approach to managing cultural diversity and was eventually officially adopted by the national government. While some criticisms have exposed the limitations and the rhetorical emptiness of the national policies of *multicultural conviviality*, disaster solidarity still represents a precious resource for civil society, allowing us to promote more inclusive, cohesive, and diverse societies.

Contrary to widespread trends towards the shrinking of civic spaces for solidarity, disaster solidarity represents an interesting dimension for the promotion of social inclusion that may become a resource for solidarity-makers beyond the boundaries of the Japanese archipelago. Furthermore, in the context of the progressive increase of the scope and intensity of natural disasters and, more in general, of global catastrophes (such as the climate crisis or the recent COVID-19, global pandemic) disaster solidarity may come to represent one of the most relevant dimensions through which we can reconsider the role and the future of local communities.

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### Author's Information:

**Beniamino Peruzzi Castellani** is a PhD Candidate in Transnational Governance at the Scuola Normale Superiore (Faculty of Political and Social Sciences) and the Scuola Superiore Sant'Anna. His research focuses on the diffusion of models and practices of cultural diversity governance in cities by comparing cases in Europe, Japan, and South Korea. In this framework, he has been carrying out long qualitative fieldwork as a visiting researcher in some European universities, the University of Tokyo, and the Seoul Migration Research and Training Center. He is currently president of "Confluenze", an NGO working in the field of social inclusion and public policy through research projects and dissemination activities aimed at engaging local communities. In particular, since 2020 he has been coordinating the project "Florentine Religious Experiences" (EsReFi), aimed at carrying out the first extensive study of all religious communities in Florence and at establishing an observatory on local religious pluralism.