

ERIC JOHNSTON

Aileen Mioko Smith on Post-Fukushima Realities

“After Fukushima, I had flashbacks where I could look back and see the different moments leading to Fukushima, how this was a moment when we got closer to Fukushima, and this was another moment. There were many steps along the way. So, about one minute after I heard Fukushima had happened, I thought, “Oh my god, it’s déjà vu. Minamata 50 years later!”



Aileen Mioko Smith heads Kyoto-based Green Action and is one of Japan’s most respected antinuclear activists. For decades, she has warned about the dangers of building nuclear power plants, especially in a country highly prone to earthquakes. It has often been a lonely fight against an entrenched nuclear power lobby that has ruled Japan’s energy policy, and the country, with an iron fist for over four decades.

Born of an American father and Japanese mother, Smith has devoted her life to activism. In the early 1970s, as the young wife of legendary *LIFE* magazine photographer W. Eugene Smith, she helped bring the plight of mercury poisoning victims in Minamata to international attention with a series of photographs that shocked the world. After Eugene’s death, Smith turned her attention toward Japan’s fledgling nuclear power industry. Her knowledge

PHOTOGRAPH OF
AILEEN MIOKO SMITH
IN THE GREEN ACTION
OFFICE BY
JOHN EINARSEN



of how the industry, and Japanese democracy, works, and her passion and dedication towards getting Japan out of nuclear power are universally respected.

On a humid afternoon in July 2012, after weeks of massive protests against nuclear power—the largest public protests of any kind in Japan this past half century—Smith sat down for a wide-ranging interview with *Kyoto Journal's Fresh Currents* team on the lessons of Fukushima, its parallels to the Minamata tragedy, Japan's anti-nuclear movement, and Japan itself.



KYOTO JOURNAL: Having been close to this issue for a long time, do you think there is, for a lack of a better phrase, a “paradigm shift” in the way the Japanese public thinks and reacts to nuclear power?

AILEEN MIOKO SMITH: There has been a paradigm shift, indeed. Things will not go back to the way they were before. As for the protests, their massive size was spontaneous, although maintaining those huge attendance figures will be difficult. But when something happens again, Japanese people will be more willing to protest in front of the electric utility or prefectural offices, and more, quote unquote, ‘common regular people’ will show up.

What about the role of social media in politicizing ordinary Japanese who, perhaps, felt they didn't have much in common with traditional anti-nuclear activists?

It played a tremendous role. The desire to participate was already there, meaning among people who had never been politically involved. They wanted to voice their opposition, but didn't know how. Through Twitter, they realized these things were going on and also that others like them were starting to show up at demonstrations. Their reaction was, ‘Maybe I'll show up because I've fin-

ished work. I'll be a little late, but I'll go with a couple of like-minded friends.’

Where is this all heading, though? Will it lead to some sort of critical mass and a path out of nuclear power in the next couple of years?

Civil society hasn't changed to the point where there are now regular venues for continuing to voice individual concerns. There are the people who physically showed up to the protests. And then there were those watching who said, ‘I want to be part of that.’ Or, people said: ‘Protesting is different from what I'd like to do, but I really want to figure out a way to do something.’

Whether that last section of the public will continue to act or not will make all the difference. I don't know if the answer is in yet... well, it's not in. The background for doing that kind of thing is very weak in Japan, but there is definitely change in the air.

How does the traditional anti-nuclear movement integrate the concerns of those who, since 3/11, have gone from pro-nuclear or indifferent to anti-nuclear?

In the core of the anti-nuclear movement, the problem is that very little weight is put on, or time or effort spent on, the question of: “How do we communicate our message?” It's extremely poor. If you're constantly providing good information to editors and reporters, and if that effort is done properly, it gets results. This was true prior to Fukushima, and now, even more so. But such efforts are not being made, certainly not sufficiently. It just seems to be part of the basic psyche of Japan's anti-nuclear movement. It's just so hard to change.

Why is that?

There isn't one answer. But there's a view that the media is part of the establishment so why both-

er? My counter-argument is, if you're concerned about the public, that's a venue to get your message across to those you're supposed to be concerned about. But there seems to be an attitude in the anti-nuclear movement of: "The media is part of the establishment. They wouldn't get the message out anyway."

Are traditional anti-nuclear groups of the mind that, "It's our issue. It's not really a public issue"?

Not really, although some can get that way. You're affected by the fact that the public doesn't get interested. Then you become insular, because you convince yourself they won't become interested anyway. This can lead to camaraderie along the lines of: "We're this small group, slogging on. We just pulled another all-nighter. Boy, we're working away but nobody's interested..."

Didn't Chernobyl stimulate a lot of concern and boost the movement?

Yes, but that's not education. That was an event that affected people. Maybe books helped, though. One book by freelance journalist Takashi Hirose was particularly popular. Whether his facts were accurate or not is a separate issue, but he helped energize people.

Your key word there was "popular." One of the things people complain about is yes, anybody can understand certain traditional anti-nuclear activists—not you—but others, as long as they have a PhD in nuclear engineering. How do you make nuclear issues understood among a more popular, as opposed to a specialized, audience?

Years ago, we did what were known as *Demai Gakko* public meetings. They took place after Chernobyl. Attendees were regular people interested in nuclear issues. They wanted to learn enough so they could talk to, for example, five PTA members also interested in nuclear power. You would

have five sessions of a couple of hours each, where you'd learn how to teach the basic issues. Afterwards, you went out and gave talks. Lots of people became educated that way.

That would seem to be ideal for today as well.

The Demai Gakko movement was about learning the facts so you could explain them to all kinds of people. What you're talking about is more marketing and communications. There is no program in not just the anti-nuclear, but also Japan's general civil society movement for conducting workshops on how to get your message out.

Are anti-nuclear activists or concerned citizens volunteering their time to go into Japanese public schools?

The public schools won't allow it. The only thing that's been happening with that is education material, post-Fukushima, becoming even more pro-nuclear. We do try to get it changed, and argue about it...

So there is another "history textbook" controversy on the horizon. How is the Education Ministry going to write up Fukushima?

It's already being written up, but it's really a whitewash.

Is the lack of interest in learning due to a lack of civil society awareness in general?

That's right. You have to work very hard at education to accomplish it. First of all, finding somebody who could teach would be hard. Who would first know about the issues and is good at teaching, and who is willing to volunteer? Where's the venue to do it in the first place?

That leads to a fundamental question—how much knowledge about Japan's nuclear power industry



WHAT WILL REALLY HELP IS NOT PUBLIC EDUCATION, BUT EDUCATION OF DIET MEMBERS.

None of the political parties has a system whereby they can get briefed regularly by a variety of NGOs on a regular, sustained basis. We did do one briefing for the Democratic Party of Japan. But how much can you do with just one session?

Prime Minister Noda's Cabinet
PHOTO: KYODO NEWS

should you have before you start educating others? It seems a lot of Japanese people want almost a post-doctorate level of detail...

Yes, yes. "We must know whether the thickness of the steam generator tube wall is 1.3mm or 3.8mm before we can say anything."

To understand why things with nuclear power are the way they are, though, and what the key problems are, you do need a fair amount of knowledge. But few people can then explain that knowledge in a simple way to the general public. Plenty of people in Japan know enough about what's going on. It's just that they can't communicate simply.

That said, post-Fukushima, people are willing to act even if they don't know that many details. For a lot of those who came to the protests, it wasn't an attitude of "I don't know the issue well

enough so I can't go." They certainly know enough that a restart of the reactors shouldn't happen.

What about engaging the Buddhist community?

We've always had Buddhists in Fukui, and Oi. The key people in Oi are Buddhists, in fact. Buddhists are quite free, though they have to worry about using their temple for political activism. But other than that, they go out and are willing to be on TV, presenting petitions and stuff.

There's great potential for more Buddhist activism in the countryside. That's how we ended up with a monk speaking in Oi when people from Fukushima visited. He was from the town of Minami-soma and was dressed in a monk's garb. People are willing to go if they see a monk speaking. If someone asks them, "Why did you go?" they can reply, "Well, there was a monk speaking..."

But it always comes down to the practical. I'd love to do more education and media outreach, but it's a lot of work. It's not like the path has already been created, and you just have to spend a little time and effort. No, you have to create the path, find the people, and be able to present the facts so that they can be easily understood. Then you make contact with those who would be interested.

What if all the antinuclear NGOs in Japan agreed to do a Demai-gakko type of education?

If it were not flashy, more traditional, they would do it. My question, though, is that, while I could get people interested and come, would they do anything afterwards?

What will really help is not public education, but education of Diet members. None of the political parties has a system whereby they can get briefed regularly by a variety of NGOs on a regular, sustained basis. We did do one briefing for the Democratic Party of Japan. But how much can you do with just one session? There's no mechanism, either among political parties in Japan or within government committees for sustained education. The regular flow of information comes only from the bureaucracy.

Is this because there's no legal precedent? Or is this just an institutional/social barrier?

Political parties are free to institute a mechanism. But they won't pay for anything. They don't have a single cent to pay for any advisors.

Most Fresh Currents readers would probably assume a Japanese MP would have the same kind of budget and office structure for this kind of thing that a U.S. member of Congress, or a European parliamentarian would have...

Exactly. I've done lots of Diet briefings with Mycle Schneider [*see p. 36*] where he comes and speaks

to Japanese politicians. He and I have this repeated conversation where he says, "It goes nowhere" and I say I agree. We do a Diet session, but our information is not used. Several Diet members come each time to the sessions he and I did. I was happy, but there's no follow up, and no budget to follow up.

Fukushima is not just a Japanese issue, it's an international problem. Yet many Japanese say: "We've got it under control, don't worry about it." If you do something international in scope, then you show Japan the international community is watching, that it can't do things behind closed doors, and that you can't just chalk it up to "Japanese culture." That's what Kurokawa-san did in his English, but not Japanese, report.

I know. Right away I started saying "I can't find this"—I started reading the English first. "Great!" Then I checked the Japanese version and thought: "Where's the Japanese version of this statement?"

The issue is, can this report really change things or not, or can we use the report to really change things? What I find interesting is that there hasn't been a single email [from NGOs] saying, 'My god, let's have a meeting immediately on how to use this report and run with it.'

What can we expect the pro-nuclear power lobby to be trying over the next few months and years, to get all 50 nuclear reactors back online? What kinds of efforts do you think they are going to make, and how does one counteract that propaganda?

Things are happening, like the establishment of *Genpatsu-Zero-no-kai* (a team of antinuclear Diet members), which examined nuclear power and presented a list of the ones to shut down. The industry may be discussing who among the utilities will have to take a hit. "Why don't you take the hit in one reactor (and close it down), because we have to take make certain sacrifices, or we're all going to go down" is probably the approach.

There will be some reactors selected for particular reasons, but not all 50 will be restarted.

There are all sorts of methods of killing a reactor you don't want. The case of the Tsuruga No. 1 reactor, also in Fukui prefecture, is amazing. Experts have long said the Rokkasho reprocessing plant [which is supposed to reprocess spent nuclear fuel so that it can be reused] in Aomori prefecture is super-dangerous earthquake-wise, as are reactors in Hamaoka, Shizuoka Prefecture and Tsuruga, Fukui Prefecture.

Why didn't politicians use the fault at Rokkasho as the reason to abolish it? That would be top priority, you'd think. The Hamaoka plant is already a political hot potato, because it's agreed that it's too vulnerable to earthquakes. But the government won't pick Rokkasho because it wants to keep that project alive. So, they suddenly point to the Tsuruga plant and say: "There's an active fault line under it!"

The two reactors at Tsuruga could go. Unit one started up in 1970—42 years ago. The number two reactor is newer. But the politics of these decisions is, let's have that one go too, like a sacrificial lamb. Or maybe not. Tsuruga is operated by Japco, that's a company owned by all the utilities jointly. Genpatsu-Zero-no-kai has analyzed all 50 reactors. Of the total, a dozen or more could end up being targeted by the government for closure. Only a portion of them would be targeted.

It's the other 30-odd reactors that are the real question. Will they be kept off? The main issues are potential electricity blackouts, and the cost of keeping them offline. Those are powerful arguments for bringing them back online.

As to the first issue, though, in November 2011, various government committees were studying these issues, especially in METI. These committees were formed after 3/11 to figure out how Japan could survive with fewer nuclear power plants through the summer of 2012. But these committees suddenly stopped meeting. Then, Kansai Electric, on March 20th, said the region faced a 25% shortage of electricity without re-

start of nuclear power. It's actually zero. When we calculated the possible shortage, we found Kansai could get by without even the Oi reactors. It would be costly, because you'd have to burn more oil and coal. But, capacity-wise, we found we had enough electricity because there's so much over-capacity of supply.

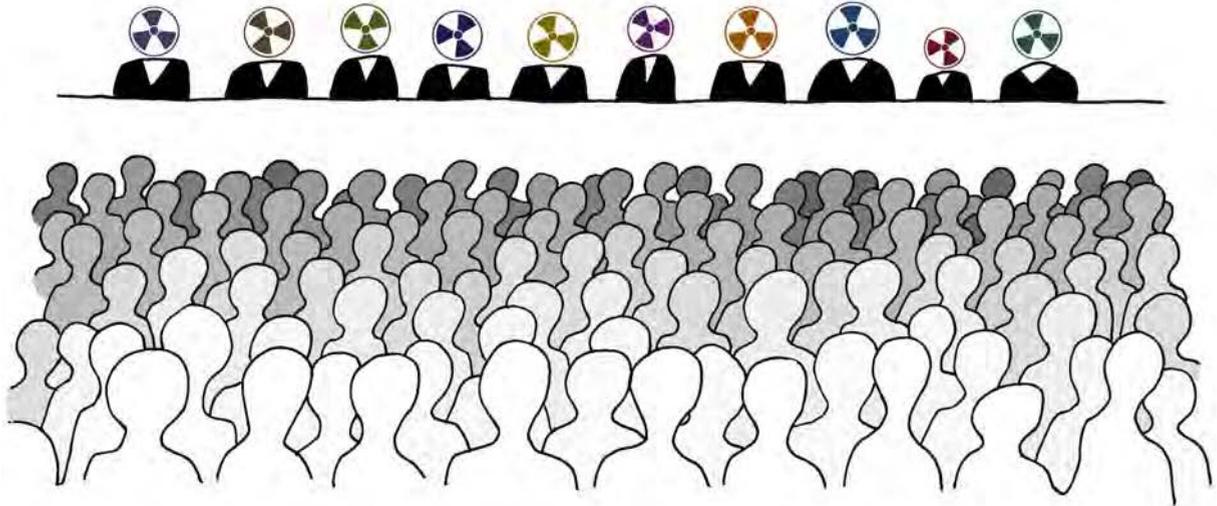
As somebody who was intimately involved with the Minamata victims, do you see history repeating itself, or at least rhyming, in the case of Fukushima? What are some of the key similarities, and differences, you've noticed between the way Minamata was handled and the way the Japanese government is handling Fukushima?

There were ten common things to both tragedies, and I outlined these in a recent interview with the *Mainichi Shimbun* [see The 10 Strategies]. In both Minamata and Fukushima, what the government did was to first sow confusion about the cause. In Minamata, the question was: could it be mercury poisoning? The government said no, and even got some professor to say it could have been bombs dropped in Minamata Bay that were now leaking. Years later this guy testified he had no evidence bombs had been dropped in the bay.

So even if the government admits the excuse is wrong later, it doesn't matter. What they want to do is to buy time, and you do that by confusing people. Now the cause of Minamata disease was very clear. It was some kind of heavy-metal poison in fish. But the tactic on the part of the government from the beginning of Minamata was to confuse people about which metal and what mechanism so that nobody looked at the problem and said "Hey, it doesn't matter what the cause is. We know it's poisonous, so let's prohibit the eating of fish."

Is this a "paralysis by analysis" tactic?

That's one way to put it. Of course, Kumamoto University professors were really trying to figure



THE 10 STRATEGIES

Taken by the State, Prefectural Governments, Academic Flunkies
and Companies in the Cases of Minamata and Fukushima

1

Do not take responsibility.
Use sectionalism to pin blame on others.

2

Confuse victims and public opinion,
creating the impression that there are pros
and cons on each side.

3

Position victims in conflict with each other.

4

Do not record data or leave evidence.

5

Stall for time.

6

Conduct tests or surveys that will produce
underestimated results on damage.

7

Wear victims down until they give up.

8

Create an official certification
system that narrows down victim numbers.

9

Do not release information abroad.

10

Call on academic flunkies to hold
international conferences.



out what caused Minamata disease. But this was a straightforward food and sanitation issue. The government didn't use the laws that were on the books at the time because they said they couldn't prove that 100% of the fish in Minamata Bay were poisoned, and therefore they couldn't use the law to prohibit fishing in Minamata Bay.

When you don't officially prohibit, you ensure the suffering of other people, the fisher folk, who have to self-impose fishing bans. Then they're told it's safe again, and of course they want to hear that. So they go back to fishing, and the disease spreads. The burden gets borne not by the company or the government, but by people who are actually the victims.

In the case of Fukushima, lots of radiation leaked, so nobody in the government could say "We don't know what it is." But they could say "There's a lot of confusion about how bad radiation is for you." And that's what happened. You had Yamashita Shunichi [who was appointed by the government as a health management advisor to Fukushima prefecture] repeatedly saying that

exposure to 100 millisieverts was not a problem. The whole idea is not that he has to be proven right or wrong. It's to confuse people. Is the safe level 100 millisieverts? Later people said "Wait a minute. Evidently it's 100 in a lifetime, not per year."

Confusion creates paralysis, as people think maybe it's dangerous, maybe it's not, rather concluding that even if we don't know for sure, we should take precautions.

What's the most important lesson you've learned since 3/11?

I have regrets, but lessons? I've been too busy to learn lessons (*laughs*).

Well, what is the most important thing everyone should know?

If you don't have a functioning democracy you have shit! (*laughs*) If you don't have a functioning democracy, the mistakes of the past will just keep being repeated. And not just with nuclear power.



THREE-DAY BLOCKADE OF ACCESS ROAD TO OI NUCLEAR POWER STATION, EARLY JUNE, 2012.

PHOTOS BY FUMIKO KAWAZOE

After Fukushima, I had flashbacks where I could look back and see the different moments leading to Fukushima, how this was a moment when we got closer to Fukushima, and this was another moment. There were many steps along the way. So, about one minute after I heard Fukushima had happened, I thought, “Oh my god, it’s déjà vu. Minamata 50 years later! For me, dealing with the aftermath is going to take the rest of my life, and we’re going to see the same kinds of things we saw back then, in terms of the response.”

Are you more effective now than you were before Fukushima?

The same amount of work makes a lot more difference. Before Fukushima, we couldn’t have gotten five Diet members to go with us to a Kansai Electric reactor, as we did recently. We wouldn’t have had the signatures of 122 ruling Democratic Party Diet members opposing the restart of nuclear power.

I was very moved by the Oi town meeting [in

May to discuss restarting the reactor]. We leafleted Oi maybe ten times. I went eight or nine times, house to house. And at the town meeting in April, when the central government came to explain the need for a restart, it was just amazing to see one person after another getting up to voice their concern. The way they spoke was—it’s not like they were always activists, even the language they used was really local. That meeting, if you really analyzed it—some of them aren’t straight anti-nuclear—but if you listen to every remark, it’s very moving. So where does that take us? Did the townspeople of Oi as a whole decide to protest restart? No. The end result didn’t change. But change is occurring.

I am also amazed by the young people. Not just at the Tokyo protests but in Fukui. In particular, young Fukui citizens I have met are more sensitive and think more deeply than me on these issues. They really want to make a better future for Fukui and are willing to work to make it happen.

