

The Sinking of Japan

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By Mark Schilling

The new disaster epic "Nippon Chinbotsu" (The Sinking of Japan) exploits one of those simple but brilliant ideas that has hacks everywhere slapping their foreheads with envy. The kernel - - Japan is mortally threatened by a powerful force seemingly beyond human control -- is that of dozens of monster and disaster pics, but in his eponymous 1973 novel, Sakyō Komatsu took it one step further: He imagined Japan, not stomped by giant lizards, but literally sinking as a collision of two tectonic plates causes the one supporting the archipelago to buckle under. The result is not only new oceanfront property, but a hellbroth of earthquakes and volcanos that kill millions and force the evacuation of the entire country.



"Nippon Chinbotsu," which plugged into ancient and well-founded fears about the fragility of the natural order here ("as solid as the ground you walk on" is not a Japanese saying), became a monster bestseller. Not long after the novel's publication in March, 1973, Toho cranked out a "Nippon Chinbotsu" movie, spending a then-stupendous Y500 million. Released in time for the New Year's season, it grossed Y4 billion on 6.5 million admissions, the sort of numbers that put even Godzilla -- another Toho property -- in the shade. (Like the first Godzilla movie it was later released in the US in a butchered version, called "Tidal Wave," with a famous Hollywood face -- Lorne Green as

the US president -- inserted into the story.)

Much has changed in the three decades since, but not, Toho hopes, audience fascination with the subject matter. Thus a new big-budget remake, delivering the sort of CG effects impossible in 1973 (but all too familiar from Hollywood). Given the current uproar over global warming, a more topical take might be "The Flooding of Japan," but Toho is not one to mess with a proven formula, so the pseudo science of the original mostly stays.

One addition is a more assertive central female character -- a rescue worker played by Kou Shibasaki. Also the interminable meeting scenes of the original have been mercifully trimmed. Instead, director Shinji Higuchi ("Lorelei") explains much of the scientific mumbo-jumbo using captioned images and a presentation by a briefly glimpsed US expert that even a grade schooler (and this reviewer) can understand.



Ko Shibasaki in Nippon Chinbotsu

More importantly to disaster movie fans, "Nippon Chinbotsu" gets right down to business from its first scene, with a massive earthquake that reduces the city of Numazu to rubble. The film, however, lacks the headlong momentum of Steven Spielberg's "War of the Worlds," another recent film with an apocalyptic theme (if with eruptions of space monsters, not lava). Instead, the narrative follows the stop-and-start pattern of many a 70s disaster movie -- frequently slowing to a halt for fraught meetings and partings, in spaces that are islands apart from the destruction

raining down outside.

Stranded on these islands, the cast resorts to everything from soulful grimaces to strenuous mugging, some from desperation, others from TV habit. One exception is Mao Daichi, who plays the head of the emergency management office - the Japanese equivalent of FEMA. A former star otokoyaku (player of male roles) for the Takarazuka theater troupe, Daichi effortlessly dominates the gray-suited and uniformed macho types around her with her cool intelligence, forceful personality and ageless glamour. She is also at home with the film's overwrought drama, which is like a Takarazuka play in disaster-pic drag.

The two principals, however, are Shibasaki as rescue worker Reiko Abe, and Tsuyoshi Kusanagi, who first rocketed to fame in the boy band SMAP, as deep-sea submersible pilot Toshio Onodera. They meet in the first scene, when Reiko saves both a dazed Onodera and a young girl named Misa (Ayuko Fukuda) who has become separated from her parents in the confusion of the quake's fiery aftermath.

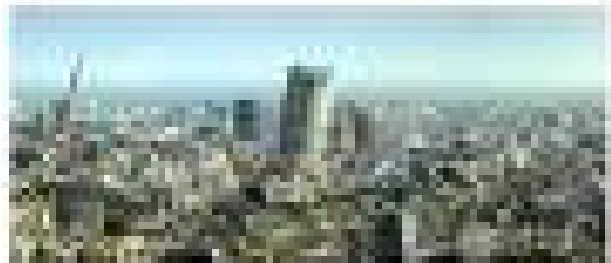
Soon after, the aforementioned US expert tells Japanese government officials that Japan will slide into the Pacific in 40 years. A skeptical earth scientist, Dr. Tadokoro (Etsushi Toyokawa), investigates this claim, sending two submersible pilots -- one of whom is Onodera -- to examine any changes in the sea bed off Japan. His conclusion: Japan will vanish in 338 days, give or take a couple hours.

As he is agonizing over his country's fate, Tadokoro is visited by Reiko, who is looking for Onodera. Her ostensible reason for coming is to tell him that Misa, her father dead and her mother in a coma, is now under her care. Her real reason is a reunion with Onodera himself -- but because nearly everyone in the film must be strenuously high-minded at all times, she can barely bring herself to hint it, though it is glaringly obviously that this guy is the One.

Together they go to visit Misa at her new home -- a monjayaki (pancake) shop run by Reiko's aunt in a funky Tokyo Bay neighborhood. Onodera is enraptured by the shop and its salt-of-the-earth regulars -- as well as by Reiko. To him they represent everything that is good about a land that is about to disappear forever.

What can anyone do about this horror? Some insiders say that, to avoid mass panic, the government should lie about the true situation while resigning itself to the worst -- shikata ga nai (it can't be helped). But the good hearted prime minister (Koji Ishizaka) can't stand by as his countrymen drown like rats on a sinking ship. He appoints his ablest minister, Takamori (Daichi), to head a task force dedicated to saving as many lives as possible.

"Nippon Chinbotsu" offers enough earthquakes, eruptions and general havoc to keep disaster fans happy, even if the CG lava flows aren't quite up to Hollywood snuff. For me, though, the film's brand of soft nationalism held more interest, No one sings "Kimigayo" as yet another cultural landmark falls to rubble, but most of the good characters opt to stay with Dainippon until the bitter (or rather salty) end.



Onodera's mother is one example: living in the beautiful Fukushima countryside in a traditional Japanese-style house, clad impeccably in kimono, her livelihood a small sake brewery left to her by her dear departed husband, she faces the end calmly and stoically. "There are some things more important than life," she intones to her son, as she elects to go down with her beloved mountains, house and husband's ihai (memorial tablet).

It's also no accident that Onodera's sub is named Wadatsumi (Ocean) - a reference to a famous collection of letters by college students who marched off to die for their country as kamikaze pilots in World War II. He and his fearless fellow pilot Yuki (Mitsuhiro Oikawa) prove as willing to give their lives for the motherland as their forefathers were, though the one who makes the final sacrifice does not plunge to the bottom shouting "banzai."

"Nippon Chinbotsu," it turns out, is nostalgic enough -- for 1945.

Does that make it a war movie in disguise -- a "rally round the Hinomaru" cry for the new generation, which knows nothing of the Pacific War, especially its horrific end?

Not quite -- the pic is more about Japan's long, intimate relationship with natural disasters than war per se. Also, from the perspective of many here, even pacifistic types, the destruction rained down on Japan in 1945 was less "war" in its classical sense of two armies clashing than a calamity like an earthquake or volcanic eruption, in which the Japanese were victims only.

But salted as it is with wartime allusions, "Nihon Chinbotsu" does have more relevance now that Japan is threatened with real missiles, since it asks this war-like question: What is more important to you -- saving your country or your own skin? -- with "country" meaning not just a political system, but a "furusato" of family, friends, community and land. In that context, the only patriotic choice for the film's loyal and brave is to go down with Mr. Fuji.

A resident of Japan since 1975, Mark Schilling reviews Japanese films for "The Japan Times" and covers the Japanese film industry for "Variety." He is the author of [Contemporary Japanese Film](#)

Posted at Japan Focus August 8, 2006.