



The Great Kantō Earthquake and a new understanding of response to natural disasters

Professor J. Charles Schencking
Arts Faculty

20 April 2017

Summary of the Impact

Professor Charles Schencking's research has revolutionized and made widely accessible a new understanding of how the Japanese have experienced, responded to, and recovered from catastrophic natural disasters over the past 100 years. Traditional research outputs - world-leading publications - have transformed how scholars, students, and journalists have comprehended Japan's seismic past. Innovative research outputs - an interactive website including a publicly assessable image and map archive, a museum exhibition, and a Discovery Channel TV documentary - have introduced millions of people from a wide variety of backgrounds to how the Japanese have interpreted, constructed, and learned from natural calamities and become world leaders in disaster response, recovery, and resilience.

Underpinning Research

Japan is the most seismically vulnerable nation on earth. The Kantō Plain, home to over 30 million inhabitants of Tokyo, Yokohama, Kawasaki and surrounding suburbs, rests at the epicentre of Japan's landscape of seismic risk. Situated near the intersection of four tectonic plates and a distinct plate fragment, this region has experienced some of the largest, most deadly, and destructive earthquakes in history. Professor Schencking's research has revolved around a number of core issues including: documenting how people have experienced, described, constructed, and reflected on natural catastrophes. It has also examined how people - elites as well as ordinary citizens - have attempted to use natural disasters and the relief and reconstruction processes that follow for larger political, social, and economic purposes. Disasters, as this research has illustrated, are not just sites of death, dislocation, and destruction, but rather events that also foster extraordinary opportunism, resilience, and in some cases outright resistance. Professor Schencking's research has also examined the political and social factors that have influenced the construction of memory and memorials in relation to natural disasters. All of this historical work helps scholars, students, and the public at large better understand disasters and responses to these calamitous events today.

Underpinning Research

- Grounded in extensive primary research conducted in Japanese archives, including the Tokyo Metropolitan Archives and Tokyo Institute of Municipal Research archives, Professor Schencking's research and subsequent "outputs" have revolutionized our understanding of Japan's worst natural disaster in history - The Great Kantō Earthquake of 1923 – and, importantly, Japan itself. Core research findings provide:
- An unrivalled social history of Japan's 1923 disaster that described and analysed how people - writers, academics, journalists, military men, relief workers, priests, parents, children, teachers, architects, planners, hospital patients, day laborers, shopkeepers, factory owners, tenants, landlords, municipal bureaucrats, political elites, social commentators, philosophers, a billiard hall manager, and even a gas station owner - experienced and interpreted this disaster.
- An innovative look into how political and military elites and social commentators attempted, opportunistically, to use the disaster to forge not only a new and "modern" metropolis - Imperial Tokyo - but also to reconstruct society on moral, spiritual, and social levels.
- A novel and in-depth analysis of how and why citizens resisted calls for sweeping changes to the neighborhoods they called home and their nation at large, thus shattering academic assumptions and popular clichés that disasters unite societies and create "blank slates" upon which governments can conjure up "new and better" cities or national trajectories.

Underpinning Research

- The extraordinary lengths that government agencies and officials, journalists, artists, and NGOs went to in order to construct and disseminate knowledge of this disaster and subsequent reconstruction and memorial projects to people throughout Japan and the international community using visual and print media, artwork and photographs.
- The social, political, and economic factors that have contributed to Japan becoming the world's undisputed leader in disaster preparedness over the course of the 20th century.
- The importance of viewing natural disasters as far more than merely agents of destruction, but rather significant revealers of society, politics, and humanity - events which disclose the opportunism and resilience in the face of upheaval.
- Professor Schencking has been invited to deliver several keynote speeches at academic conferences in Australia, Japan and the United States.

Underpinning Research: Impact on teaching at HKU

Research on natural disasters in Asia has underpinned Professor Schencking's teaching portfolio at HKU. He has developed courses to share his research findings with students at all level including:

1. CCC9004 Catastrophes, Cultures & the Angry Earth
2. HIST3027 Natural Disasters in World History, 1700 to 2009
3. HIST 4032 The Great Kantō Earthquake and the Reconstruction of Tokyo

Underpinning Research: Impact on research post-graduate supervision

Research on natural disasters in Asia has underpinned Professor Schencking's research postgraduate training engagement at HKU. He currently supervises the following student:

1. Chong Pang (Beatrice), 2016-2018. Mphil degree. "Humanitarian assistance following the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake."

Engagement & Impact– TV Documentary: 2.7 million estimated viewers

Professor Schencking’s research has made significant contributions to raising public awareness about disaster response; his research has reached millions of laypeople, that is, non-academics, through an array of different channels.

1. Discovery Channel documentary

- Research conducted into the legacy of the Great Kanto Earthquake as well as the reconstruction process that followed underpinned collaboration with the Discovery Channel in the production of a TV-documentary entitled: “Japan: Designed for Recovery” which aired on 30 September and 1 October 2016. Televised Australia, India, Japan, New Zealand, Taiwan and across South East Asia the viewership, as estimated by the Discovery Channel, was 2.7 million individuals.
- Professor Schencking was interviewed for the documentary and provided insights that were instrumental in the making of the programme. His book, *The Great Kantō Earthquake and the Chimera of National Reconstruction in Japan*, and his website were also referred to throughout the documentary as sources of analysis rare imagery.

Engagement & Impact– Website:

220,000+ visits since December 2013

Professor Schencking’s research has made significant contributions to raising public awareness about disaster response; his research has reached millions of laypeople, that is, non-academics, through an array of different channels.

2. Internet engagement and course inclusion

- Research conducted into the social and cultural history of the 1923 Great Kantō Earthquake produced a large cache of visual and print sources as well as photographs that are freely available through the project website: www.greatkantoeearthquake.com. The website has been visited over 220,000 times since its launch in December 2013. Significantly, it has been used as a core reference in university courses on environmental history and the history of modern Japan. Professor Andrea Gaynor from the University of Western Australia writes, “[o]ne of the objectives of the class is to assess Professor Schencking’s claim that natural disasters *reveal* more about a society than they *change*. This is a very significant insight for the students, and many have commented that the workshop on the earthquake was one of the highlights of the unit.” She notes that the course had 131 students in 2013 and 164 students in 2014.

Engagement & Impact: Museum exhibition of visual materials from 1923 disaster

Professor Schencking's research has made significant contributions to raising public awareness about disaster response; his research has reached millions of laypeople, that is, non-academics, through an array of different channels.

3. Museum exhibition

- The research also led to a large museum exhibit entitled “Aftershocks: Experiences of Japan’s Great Kantō Earthquake,” held at the Noel Shaw Gallery, University of Melbourne between 1 September 2015 and 8 March 2016. Estimates indicate that over 1,000 people visited the exhibition. The curator of the exhibition, Hannah Gould, writes, “The University is . . . indebted to the initiative taken by Prof Schencking in building a collection of original documents and artefacts relating to the earthquake. Consequentially, this is now one of the single most significant collections of these documents outside of Japan.” Media coverage included articles in *The Age* newspaper as well as the local Melbourne-based Japanese language press.

Engagement & Impact: Public lectures and community talks

Professor Schencking's research has made significant contributions to raising public awareness about disaster response; his research has reached millions of laypeople, that is, non-academics, through an array of different channels.

4A. Public talks and potential for policy changes

Professor Schencking's research has helped propel the burgeoning field of natural disaster scholarship within many academic fields and the history and Japan's seismic past within larger discussions surrounding preparedness, resilience, and post disaster reconstruction today.

- “Catastrophe, Opportunism, and Humanitarianism,” *Aftershocks: Experiences of Japan's Great Earthquake* Conference and Museum Exhibition Opening. University of Melbourne, 11-12 September, 2014.
- “The Political and Ideological Use of Catastrophe in Japan,” University of Kyoto Global Survivability Studies *Rising Leaders Public Seminar*. Kyoto, 7 November 2013.

Engagement & Impact: Public lectures and community talks

Professor Schencking's research has made significant contributions to raising public awareness about disaster response; his research has reached millions of laypeople, that is, non-academics, through an array of different channels.

4B. Public talks and potential for policy changes

Professor Schencking's research has helped propel the burgeoning field of natural disaster scholarship within many academic fields and the history and Japan's seismic past within larger discussions surrounding preparedness, resilience, and post disaster reconstruction today.

- “The Great Kantō Earthquake and the Chimera of National Reconstruction in Japan,” *History in the Making Public Lecture Series*. University of Hong Kong, 28 November 2013.
- “The Great Kantō Earthquake and the Chimera of National Reconstruction in Japan,” *Royal Asiatic Society of London Public Lecture Series Presentation*. RAS, London. 10 October 2013.
- “Echoes of 1923 in the Tohoku Earthquake and Tsunami Disaster,” *Association for Asian Studies Late Breaking News Panel: After 3/11: Japan in the Wake of Earthquake, Tsunami, and Nuclear Crisis*. Association for Asian Studies. Honolulu, Hawaii, 31 March – 3 April 2011.

Engagement & Impact: Public lectures and community talks

Professor Schencking's research has made significant contributions to raising public awareness about disaster response; his research has reached millions of laypeople, that is, non-academics, through an array of different channels.

4C. Keynote addresses and invited talks

Professor Schencking's research has helped propel the burgeoning field of natural disaster scholarship within many academic fields and the history and Japan's seismic past within larger discussions surrounding preparedness, resilience, and post disaster reconstruction today.

- "An Orgy of Cheerful Giving: American Humanitarian Aid to Disaster-stricken Japan," *School of Modern Languages and Cultures Seminar Series*. 13 April 2016.
- "Constructing Japan's 1923 Earthquake Calamity for Relief and Reconstruction," *Images of Disasters: International Conference, Cluster of Excellence Asia and Europe in a Global Context*. The University of Heidelberg, 1-3 March 2012.
- "Catastrophe, Opportunity, and Contestation: The Great Kantō Earthquake and the Chimera of National Reconstruction in Japan," *The 11th Australasian Urban History/Planning History Conference*. University of Western Australia, Perth, 5-8 February 2012.
- "Constructing, Contesting, and Memorializing Japan's Earthquake Calamity," *Japanese History Workshop*. Japan Foundation and Murdoch University, 30 November – 3 December 2011.
- "Earthly Extravagance, Heavenly Punishment: Interpreting Catastrophe in the Shadow of the Great War," *Fifth Murdoch University Japanese Studies Symposium*. Murdoch University, 15 December 2009.

Sources to corroborate the engagement & impact

- Letter and viewership statistics provided by Dominic Young, producer of Discovery Channel Documentary entitled, Japan: Designed for Recovery, dated 30 January 2017.
- Letter from Professor Andrea Gaynor, University of Western Australia, dated 27 January 2017.
- Letter from Ms. Hannah Gould, curator of “Aftershocks: Experiences of Japan’s Great Kantō Earthquake,” dated 27 January 2017.

Sources to corroborate the impact of underpinning research (1)

Published reviews of *The Great Kantō Earthquake and the Chimera of National Reconstruction in Japan*

- "The author is to be commended for his painstaking research, accessing popular journals, academic publications, folklore, song and commentaries issuing from political, military and business sources from the 1910s to the 20s... the only major work of its kind in English." ***The Japan Times***
- "Schencking's study... is based on an enormous amount of research. Well-written and compelling it... will act as a seminal work not only on the disaster itself, but on the politics and narrative of the disaster, for many years to come." **Janet Hunter, *Modern Asian Studies* 50:1 (January 2016): 815-835.**
- "Schencking is a demon researcher... [who has created] a compelling narrative history as well as a satisfying analytic one... tenaciously researched, imaginatively argued, and carefully crafted." **Mark Jones, *Journal of Asian Studies* (August 2016): 836-839.**

Sources to corroborate the impact of underpinning research (2)

Published reviews of *The Great Kantō Earthquake and the Chimera of National Reconstruction in Japan*

- Schencking, a historian at the University of Hong Kong, has spent a decade and more excavating hitherto untranslated Japanese sources... his is the first book, either in English or Japanese, to cover the entire story from 1923 up to 1930." ***The LA Review of Books***
- "A gracefully written and searching analysis that places Japan's deadliest earthquake in historical context. An important contribution to the literature on natural disaster that moves beyond the clichés often told about reconstruction." **Theodore Steinberg**
- "A meticulous study... The Great Kanto Earthquake is a superb work of historical scholarship and a major contribution to our understanding of modern Japan and modern natural disasters." **Gregory Smits, *Journal of Japanese Studies* 40:2 (August 2014): 505-509.**

Sources to corroborate the impact of underpinning research (3)

Published reviews of *The Great Kantō Earthquake and the Chimera of National Reconstruction in Japan*

- "In Schencking's excellent and engaging book, an anatomy of a disaster reminiscent of Richard J. Evans's classic *Death in Hamburg: Society and Politics in the Cholera Years: 1830-1910* ...[he] painstakingly reveals the anxieties, the hopes, and the political dynamism of 1920s Japan." **Martin Dusinberre, *The American Historical Review* 119:2 (April 2014): 499-500.**
- "Overall, this meticulously researched monograph not only provides a rare picture of how Taishō Japan worked and saw itself, but also casts a sobering light on contemporary expectations that 3.11 will necessarily transform Japan into a stronger, greener and denuclearized country." **Andre Haag, *Pacific Affairs*, 89:1 (March 2016).**
- "In fact, the book is the first study in English or Japanese that details how elites interpreted, constructed, and packaged the 1923 Great Kantō Earthquake and attempted to use it for larger political, ideological, social and economic aims... Chapters can be read separately according to the reader's interests, whether they are historians, political scientists or Japanologists. **Tamaki Tokita, *Asian Studies Review* 39:2 (February 2015): 244-346.**

Sources to corroborate the impact of underpinning research (4)

Published reviews of *The Great Kantō Earthquake and the Chimera of National Reconstruction in Japan*

- "The results are laudable, for Schencking has drawn together and contributed immeasurably to a number of otherwise disparate scholarly literatures... with an enviable eye for detail and with prose that is positively poetic... In sum, this is an excellent book that is much more than a recount of a cataclysmic event. It uses the quake as a conceptual lens through to which view 1920s Japan in its many complexities. Our understanding of Taishō Japan will only be the richer for Schencking's efforts. **Peter Mauch, *Japanese Studies* 34:1 (May 2014): 105-107.**
- "Deeply researched and well written, it is a major contribution to the urban history of modern Japan as well as to the burgeoning field of disaster studies." **Peter Duus**