Lessons from Japan: Empowering Children, Promoting Disaster Preparedness, and Helping Communities Recover

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Dr. Janet Borland’s research challenges the popular idea that Japanese people owe their resilience in the face of disaster to some innate sense of calm. Japan’s contemporary culture of preparedness is the result of learned and practiced behaviors that began in earnest after the 1923 Great Kantō Earthquake. Children, schools and education were the primary tools through which experts sought to build a disaster-prepared society and nation.

Diverse and far-reaching activities such as a joint initiative with Mitsubishi Corporation, 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 catastrophic natural disasters over the past 100 years and become world leaders in disaster response, recovery, and resilience.

“Don’t panic!” Japan’s first earthquake lesson for primary school children, published in textbook for third graders.
This project is underpinned by Dr. Janet Borland’s research on the origins of modern Japan’s infrastructure of resilience and reflected in her book, *Earthquake Children: Building Resilience from the Ruins of Tokyo* (Harvard University Asia Center, 2020).

Borland illustrates that Japan’s contemporary culture of disaster preparedness and its people’s ability to respond calmly in a time of emergency are the result of learned and practiced behaviors. She traces their roots to the 1923 Great Kantō Earthquake, which killed over 100,000 people when it struck the Tokyo region. *Earthquake Children* documents how children, schools, and education became the primary tools through which experts sought to build a disaster-prepared society and nation that would withstand nature’s furies.

Borland’s findings transcend not only academic disciplines—moving beyond Japanese history to encompass the history of childhood and youth, natural disasters, and recovery—but also time, illustrating real impact and potential value to researchers, policymakers, and government officials who today focus on creating “cultures of preparedness.”

*Earthquake Children* was awarded the 2020 Hong Kong Academy of the Humanities First Book Prize.
In the aftermath of the magnitude 7.9 earthquake and fires that destroyed Tokyo in September 1923, concerns about children were paramount: two-thirds lost their homes and also their schools. Just because children were the youngest and most vulnerable members of society, did not mean that they were absent, voiceless, or invisible in the ruins. In fact, the opposite was true. Within weeks, children returned to school and wrote about their experiences of the disaster and their hopes for reconstructed Tokyo.

Borland’s pioneering methodology uses these remarkable accounts to provide a panoramic view into children’s first-hand experiences of Japan’s worst natural disaster and daily life in the aftermath. She demonstrates how and why children played an important role as agents of recovery, harbingers of hope, symbols of resilience, and ambassadors of gratitude.

Grounded in extensive primary research conducted in Japanese archives, Borland’s innovative research not only provides unique insights into Japan’s culture of preparedness and resilience, she highlights the contemporary relevance of children who can and should play an active role in disaster-prone communities as agents of recovery with voices to be listened to and learned from.

Since joining the Department of Japanese Studies in 2014, Borland has actively developed synergies between her research, teaching, and knowledge exchange activities. She has devised the following courses to share her research findings with students:

- **JAPN4003 Japan: Earthquake Nation capstone course** (SETL scores consistently 90-100)
- In 2016 she partnered with Mitsubishi Corporation, Japan’s largest and best-known trading company, to devise an innovative experiential learning project entitled the “Young Leaders Tour of Japan (YLTJ)”
- The YLTJ was launched in 2017, and offered as a credit-bearing course JAPN2096 from 2018

Recognition of effective and innovative teaching
- **2018 University of Hong Kong Outstanding Teaching Award**
- **2017 Arts Faculty Teaching Excellence Award**

Ruins of Ōkawa Primary School
Photograph by Janet Borland
Features of Young Leaders Tour of Japan (JAPN2096)

- Field trip to Fukushima, Miyagi and Tokyo gives students firsthand experience of recovery and reconstruction initiatives in Tōhoku following the 2011 Great Eastern Japan Earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear crisis
- This unique University-Corporate partnership is the first of its kind to support experiential learning at the University of Hong Kong and stems from Borland’s GRF-funded research expertise on earthquakes and post-disaster recovery
- Aligns with and enhances HKU’s vision as an institution “committed to producing well-rounded graduates with lifelong abilities to provide leadership within the societies they serve”
Engagement with the people of Tōhoku

One of the stated learning outcomes of the Young Leaders Tour of Japan is to foster engagement with local stakeholders in Tōhoku, Japan. As partners, hosts, and beneficiaries, these people and businesses in Miyagi and Fukushima are endeavoring to rebuild and raise their profile after the 2011 earthquake and tsunami. Between 2017 and 2020, we engaged with the following:

JETRO (Japan External Trade Organisation), Tōhoku Tourism, MORIUMIUS Sustainable Learning Center, Ogatsu Primary School, Akiu Winery, GRA Strawberry Farm, Michisaki Hydroponic Farm, and Minamisoma Solar Agri Park
Engagement

Tōhoku: Northeast Japan
• Less than 1% of foreign tourists to Japan visit the six prefectures of Tōhoku
• In addition, challenges stemming from a rapidly aging society and depopulation of rural communities have exacerbated post-disaster recovery
• Abandoned school buildings serve as a reminder of the rapidly aging society and declining birth rate

The Young Leaders Tour of Japan has had a significant social, cultural, educational, and economic impact on the communities we visited in Miyagi and Fukushima, especially the town of Ogatsu.

Ogatsu: A fishing town in Miyagi, 450km north of Tokyo
• On March 11, 2011, Ogatsu was destroyed by 22-meter high waves
• 80% of houses were destroyed
• Population shrank from 4,300 to 1,000

“Welcome to Ogatsu-chō”
Photograph by Janet Borland
Opened in 2015 in a renovated primary school building, MORIUMIUS is a residential eco-activity center for children located in Ogatsu.

Beneficial engagement with MORIUMIUS is encapsulated by two innovative activities designed to empower local children—the future of Ogatsu—and promote their feelings of hometown pride.
Engagement with tsunami survivor

Borland’s research has made significant contributions to raising public awareness about disaster response, the experiences of children caught up in these traumatic events, and the role of children as agents of recovery and resilience in post-disaster communities.

Fujimoto Nodoka was eleven years old when the tsunami destroyed her hometown Ogatsu.

As a young survivor, Nodoka delivers a powerful message that deserves to be heard, and in doing so, she is empowered to become an active agent for promoting disaster preparedness.

In forums held with the Young Leaders Tour of Japan in 2018 and 2019, Nodoka told her story of survival and lessons about what to do when an earthquake and tsunami strikes.

Participants shared stories about the 2011 disaster and 2018 Typhoon Manghut, and discussed ideas for building community resilience for future disasters.
Engagement with the children of Ogatsu Primary School

“Let’s Explore Our Hometown”
• In 2018, grade 3 and 4 students introduced their hometown to visiting University of Hong Kong students as part of the Young Leaders Tour of Japan program.

• Their colorful powerpoint slide presentations showcased Ogatsu’s shrines, festivals, traditions, and food, and a Q&A session followed.

• For these children—all born after the 2011 tsunami—the exchange was a unique and memorable experience that deepened their hometown pride.
Teachers and students from Ogatsu Primary School wrote:

“The HKU students told us, We feel like Ogatsu is a place we want to come home to, not just come back to; The ocean is so beautiful in Ogatsu!; Where I live, we can’t really see the stars, but in Ogatsu the stars are very beautiful!”

“It was a valuable experience for the children to be able to give a presentation to people they met for the first time (and who were all foreigners) and to hear about the goodness of Ogatsu from the outside perspective. Thank you.”
6 March 2018

“We received many words of encouragement (from HKU) in response to the children’s voices: We want to protect the rich nature of our hometown Ogatsu-chō.”
9 March 2018
Empowering the children of Ogatsu Primary School

Photograph by CK Lee
Award Ceremony & Public Photo Exhibition

- Participants in the Young Leaders Tours of Japan share their learning outcomes related to post-disaster recovery and renewal with the Hong Kong community in a public photo exhibition held every April, as part of Japan Month at HKU.

- To mark the opening of the Photo Exhibition, an award ceremony is held to celebrate student achievements, and to thank Mitsubishi Corporation for their generous sponsorship of the Young Leaders Tour of Japan. Mitsubishi Corporation executives, consulate officials and media, join faculty and parents.

Impacts Achieved

Above: President of Mitsubishi Corporation (HK) presents certificate to Young Leader, 2019
Below: Young Leader (center) guides visitors from Mitsubishi Corporation (left) and the Japanese Consulate-General (right) through the Public Photo Exhibition, 2018

Photographs by CK Lee
Impacts Achieved

Inspired by their meetings with tsunami survivors and visit to the Ikebukuro Life Safety Learning Center in Tokyo to learn vital survival skills, students raise public awareness about disaster preparedness with the Hong Kong community via a public photo exhibition and engagement with the media (including Hong Kong keizai shinbun, Yahoo!Japan, Concierge magazine).

Imagine a tsunami strikes. Could you stay calm and run all the way to safety? There is no time to panic. You need to be strong enough to save your own life and help others. We learned many lessons after 3.11.

Young Leaders interviewed by Oriental Daily newspaper, 2018
Impacts Achieved: Local and International Media


Yahoo!Japan website, 11 April 2017.
Impacts Achieved: 2.7 million viewers

“Japan: Designed for Recovery”
Discovery Channel TV-documentary, supported by the Prime Minister’s Office of Japan

- Borland was interviewed as an expert on earthquakes for this TV-documentary and gave insights that were instrumental in the making of the program.
- The program used the case of the 2016 Kumamoto Earthquakes to explore Japan’s historic experiences of seismic events, and how modern damage mitigation and recovery systems make it a leader in earthquake resiliency.
- The program premiered in various countries of the Asia Pacific region between September 30 and 1 October 2016, and was repeated several times thereafter.
- It is estimated that the audience reached a total of 2.7 million viewers across the region.
Foreseeable Impact

Natural Hazards Workshop, 11-12 July 2021
• Borland’s impact on the field of contemporary disaster risk reduction can be found in an invitation to join this workshop at the University of Colorado, Boulder.
• She will showcase *Earthquake Children* at the “New Reads—Meet the Authors” forum.

FEMA and USGS
• The Director of the Natural Hazards Center recommended *Earthquake Children* to government agency workers at FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) and the USGS (United States Geological Survey), the foremost institutions in the United States responsible for “helping people before, during and after disasters,” and ensuring that “policy makers and the public have the understanding they need to enhance preparedness, response, and resilience.”
Future Plans for Sharing Research Findings with the Public

- Create a companion website www.earthquakechildren.com
- Continue working with Mitsubishi Corporation on the Young Leaders Tour of Japan
- Partner with a new businesses in Fukushima (Ouse Winery)
- Establish a new partnership with Tōhoku University to enable joint learning activities between students from Hong Kong and Japan during future Young Leaders Tour of Japan field trips

“Smile”
Famous calligrapher Maaya Wakasugi worked with children who experienced the 2011 earthquake to create this artwork depicting cherry blossoms and the kanji character 笑, which means “smile”. Photograph by Janet Borland