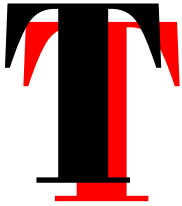




Overcoming Homelessness: Fukushima and Hong Kong

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This article weaves the reminiscences, remarks and questions found in reports, poems, films and philosophical works about Fukushima and Hong Kong in order to ask again: To be, or not to be? It brings alive the many implications of ten years of Fukushima and the recent years of political developments in Hong Kong. While many Fukushima people were forced to leave their contaminated hometown, many Hong Kong people are now considering leaving Hong Kong. Fukushima and Hong Kong people thought they are lonely orphans, but we can share our experience of how to overcome homelessness. The article thus raises fundamental questions about the meaning of home, home-leaving, exile, eviction and homecoming in an era where catastrophic events and their long-term consequences for common people have partly become uncontrollable and partly reveal the frequent disinterest in remedying avoidable harm to people.



en years ago, the Fukushima Daiichi accident occurred. The severity of the accident can be seen in International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)'s report: "Despite the efforts of the operators at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant to maintain control, the reactor cores in Units 1–3 overheated, the nuclear fuel melted and the three containment vessels were breached. Hydrogen was released from the reactor pressure vessels, leading to explosions inside the reactor buildings in Units 1, 3 and 4 that damaged structures and equipment and injured personnel. Radionuclides were released from the plant to the atmosphere and were deposited on land and on the ocean. There were also direct releases into the sea." (1) IAEA former director Amano Yukiya notes, "The immense human impact of the Fukushima Daiichi accident should not be forgotten. More than 100,000 people were evacuated because of the release of radionuclides to the environment. At the time of writing, in 2015, many of them were still unable to return to their homes."

First of all, we should first clarify that there are two "Fukushimas", namely, the "Fukushima Prefecture" (population: 1,848,000) and the "Fukushima City" (population: 290,000). The Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Plant is not located in Fukushima City; rather, it is located along the coastline of Fukushima Prefecture, known as Hamadori. In 2013, I visited Fukushima Prefecture with some teaching staff and students from Hong Kong. Saulius Geniusas from the department of philosophy notes,

Here we are closed to the power plant. I am probably the first Lithuanian to come here, and you would think we came to see this gorgeous nature around. But this is a heavily polluted place. So the contrast is remarkable... I keep on thinking about the contrast between the beauty of the place and the severity of the disaster. I know many people who would come here and say this is at least one of the most beautiful places they have visited. The roads are remarkable. Here you can see the Pacific Ocean. The villages we passed are old and seem to be well established. And even now you can see so few people, so everything is so clean and in order. This contrast is very hard to be comprehended. How can a place be so beautiful and could be so unsafe and unlivable? The only way for the people to live here is self-forgiveness and the denial of what is happening. You have to somehow deceive yourself, "everything is

okay; nothing is really taking place.” Because if you do not do that, you will not be here.

At that time, I tried to explain to him that people might have been living in these “old villages” for many generations. They have their family houses, family paddy fields and family graves there, so they have a strong sense of belonging. By means of “decontamination,” that is the government funded project of removing radioactive substances in the surrounding environment, they should be able to return to their homeland in near future.

Indeed, the Japanese word for homeland is *furusato*, which means literally the village (*sato*) of the past (*furu*). Yamaguchi Kiyoko, a Japanese historian who also joined the trip, mentions the Japanese song *furusato* in a talk titled “Memories of Tohoku” (delivered on 14 March 2014 in Hong Kong):

兎追ひし彼の山
小鮒釣りし彼の川
夢は今も巡りて
忘れ難き故郷
如何にいます父母
恙無しや友がき
雨に風につけても
思ひ出づる故郷
志を果たして
いつの日にか歸らん
山は青き故郷
水は清き故郷

The mountain I chased rabbits
the river I fished crucians
I still pursue my dream
Yet I cannot forget my hometown
How are my father and mother
How are my friends
Whether it is rainy or windy
Homeland refrains in my heart
When I reach my goal
Someday I will return to the homeland where
mountains are blue
streams are clear

For Yamaguchi, Fukushima is not her hometown, but she was sympathetic to the people of Fukushima who lost their *furusato*. In her talk, she also mentions the following voices of local people whom we met in a temporary shelter:

“They give us minimum living expense, but I cannot farm.”
“What do we want? Not compensation. We just want to live like before.”

“Please don’t forget us. Don’t forget Fukushima. Other Japanese ‘recovered’ and have normal, happy life. That is good. But it’s really sad we are left alone and separated from the world.”
“In the first year, we kept crying. We could not stop. But in the second year, we ‘decided’ not to cry anymore and look forward to future.”

“What do I want to tell to Hong Kong people? Tell them Fukushima has many nice places. I will not ask them to come as tourists; I know foreigners are scared of Fukushima. Our Fukushima is a beautiful place. My house has this old wooden beam, you might like it.”

However, there are voices that left unheard. Mizunoya Suguru, who was a former colleague of mine and is currently working for the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), suggests children in his hometown in Fukushima were voiceless. He writes,

Barely a month after the explosion of the nuclear power plants, Iwaki city government decided to reopen schools. I don’t know how this decision was made as some schools further inland decided to delay their openings, and unlike cities and towns inland of Fukushima, the gas and water pipes in Iwaki city were still damaged and public transportation was not yet restored. Furthermore, the mayor and senior officials announced publicly that the city government was supporting local agriculture and fisheries by promoting the consumption of local food by local people. This may not sound very special to you. Or even interesting. But I was furious with these decisions.

There was no system in place to monitor the amount of radioactivity in our food supply. It was not yet known how much radioactivity had been released from the power plants. The critical moments to prevent a meltdown had not yet passed. Yet the immediate implication of such an announcement was that all school meals would be prepared using local foods—without even a simple test to detect their levels of radioactivity.

Was the local government considering the implications for children when they made such an announcement? I understood that the mayor wanted to protect local industries and calm worried fishermen and farmers. He responded to the voices of these local adults. But who was giving voice to the children of Fukushima? Who was representing their interests? (2)

Mizunoya lived in Fukushima when he was young, but he did not care about nuclear power plants. “Only when I witnessed the nuclear

accidents, did I realize that we had collectively made a decision to push all the risks and responsibilities onto future generations without realizing the true costs of our decision. My hometown is dead,” he confessed.

What is the point of returning to a place which is dead? In 2014, there is a Japanese film titled *Ieji* (English title: Homeland). The synopsis of the film is as follows:

Jiro has come home. His tiny farming village is now deserted because it lies in the badly contaminated Fukushima zone. Nonetheless, Jiro begins cultivating his land. An old school friend helps him and together they plant rice. “It’s like slow suicide”, says Jiro’s friend. Jiro’s half-brother, Soichi, who has evacuated with his family cannot believe that Jiro has moved back into the old home. Soichi’s step-mother, who is Jiro’s biological mother, had never got over Jiro leaving. Suffused with grief and poetry, the images in this film describes life after the nuclear catastrophe. They also tell us what it means to go home when home will never be the same again. (3)

Kobayashi Toshiaki, a Japanese philosopher based in Leipzig, mentions *Ieji* in his book titled *Age of Homelessness*. (4) As Jiro says, “I came back because no one was here.” Without doubt, this is a naïve return; but at the same time, it shows Jiro’s guilty conscience. In the film, Jiro managed to overcome the difficulties of growing rice on polluted land as well as living illegally in a ghost town. The film finishes with a happy ending that gives appraisal to Jiro’s love of and brave return to his *furusato*.

As written by Martin Heidegger, “Only thus does the overcoming of homelessness begin from Being, a homelessness in which not only man but the essence of man stumbles aimlessly about. Homelessness so understood consists in the abandonment of Being by beings. Homelessness is the symptom of oblivion of Being.” One may say that Jiro’s return to his *furusato* sounds like an overcoming of “homelessness (Heimatlosigkeit).” In reality, however, it is nothing but wishing thinking. According to a report from Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), it reads,

Seven years after the nuclear disaster in Fukushima, actions for the reconstruction and revitalization of Fukushima are in full implementation process, with evacuation orders lifted for most of the areas. In March 2017, housing subsidies reportedly stopped to be provided to self-evacuees, who fled from areas other than the government-designated evacuation zones.

Following the nuclear disaster, Japan raised the acceptable level of radiation for residents in Fukushima from 1 mSv/year to 20 mSv/year. The Universal Periodic Review mechanism of the Human

Rights Council recommended that the Government of Japan return acceptable levels of exposure to those before Fukushima. The Special Rapporteur has raised concerns with the Government on both the situation confronting residents, including children and women of reproductive age, who may return to areas above 1 mSv/yr, as well as concerns regarding the exposure of workers involved in the remediation of the prefecture. The death of a remediation worker from lung cancer was recently recognized as resulting from exposure to radiation. (5)

We have to say, returning to an unlivable place (e.g. Fukushima or Chernobyl) with an unacceptable dose of radiation is a clear violation of basic human right, and should never be glorified. Now I am in agreement with Geniusas, who has a point in questioning why we have to go back to a contaminated hometown.

2021 is not only the tenth anniversary of Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Incident, but also the year of the postponed Tokyo Olympics Games. Tokyo was awarded the Olympic Games in 2013, with Former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe making the following claim during his speech to International Olympic Committee (IOC) in Buenos Aires:

It would be a tremendous honour for us to host the Games in 2020 in Tokyo - one of the safest cities in the world, now... and in 2020.

Some may have concerns about Fukushima. Let me assure you, the situation is under control. It has never done and will never do any damage to Tokyo.

I can also say that, from a new stadium that will look like no other to confirmed financing, Tokyo 2020 will offer guaranteed delivery. (6)

Under the COVID19 crisis, it is uncertain whether the Olympic Games will be held as scheduled. Despite the fact that both the pandemic (e.g. issues related to mutated coronavirus and vaccination) and Fukushima (e.g. issues related to contaminated water and decommissioning) are far from under control, I made a decision to move to Tokyo. In other words, I left Hong Kong, my hometown.

I was born in Hong Kong in the 1970s. Naturally, Hong Kong is my *lieu de naissance*, but my grandfather on my father's side was originally from Nanhai, near Guangzhou. Since he moved to Hong Kong, we have lost contact with our hometown. When I was a primary school student, I visited China with my family for the first time. However, the destination was Zhongshan, which is the hometown of my grandmother on my mother's side. At that time, I had to apply for two types of travel documents: "Re-entry Permit" and "Mainland Travel Permit." The "Re-entry Permit" was issued by Immigration Department of the British

colonial government in Hong Kong, while “Mainland Travel Permit” was issued by China Travel Service, a travel agency. (7)

The straight-line distance between Hong Kong and Zhongshan is only 87 km, but at that time the journey took almost a day: In the morning we took a bus to China Ferry Terminal, where we took a ferry to Macau. After arriving at the Macau Ferry Terminal, we took a bus to Gongbei and crossed the border, and from there we chartered a van to Zhongshan. Once we arrived in Zhongshan, we had to transfer to a tuk-tuk to my grandmother’s village in a village called Shiqi. By the time we arrived, it was already evening, but our relatives were kind enough to welcome us with a reception dinner. Suddenly, I could not understand a single word from my grandmother, as she stopped speaking Cantonese and switched to a dialectic spoken only in Zhongshan, or more precisely, Shiqi.

As a young boy, I could not understand the significance of the trip. I just took some photos of the villages, learnt how to ride a bicycle, played with fireworks and sand cannons (banned in Hong Kong), and returned to Hong Kong with the feeling of missing my cousins. Later, I realized the following facts: 1) The purpose of our trip to mainland was to transport clothes and goods to our relatives living there; 2) one of the relatives was a teacher who had suffered a lot during the Cultural Revolution; and 3) my grandmother left her hometown at a young age but she never forgets her hometown.

In 1980s, China began to reform and open up, but the living conditions were far from ideal. But in 1984, United Kingdom and China signed the Sino-British Joint Declaration, in which it is agreed that “The Government of the United Kingdom declares that it will restore Hong Kong to the People’s Republic of China with effect from 1 July 1997.” (8) Finally, the following song was performed in the rain, and Hong Kong began the experiment of “One country two systems”:

Should auld acquaintance be forgot,
And never brought to mind?
Should auld acquaintance be forgot
And days of auld lang syne?

After the handover, however, there is still a border between Hong Kong and Mainland China. Hong Kong people still need to present their “Mainland Travel Permit” when they enter or leave the Mainland. With high speed rails and highway network, it is much more convenient to travel from Hong Kong to Zhongshan, but after my grandmother passed away, I lost my reason to go back to hometown. Perhaps I should say, I lost a hometown that never belonged to me.

I was fortunate enough to visit my grandmother’s hometown. Although I missed the opportunity to know more about her stories in China and Hong Kong, I think now I can understand why she likes this Chinese poem written by He Zhizhang (659–744):

少小離家老大回
鄉音無改鬢毛衰
兒童相見不相識
笑問客從何處來

Leaving hometown young and returning old
I am aging but still keep my dialectic
Welcome by children who have no idea who I am
so they ask where are you from?

People might have to learn new languages in a new environment, but keeping the mother tongue is not an easy task. Recently, I watched a 2015 Hong Kong film called “Sap Nin” (meaning: Ten years). It is a collection of five short films that imagine what Hong Kong will look like in ten years’ time. One of the short films is titled “Dialect,” in which “a taxi driver struggles to adjust after Putonghua displaces Cantonese as Hong Kong’s only official language.” (9) No matter what will happen in Hong Kong in 2025, Cantonese will be still the language spoken by many Hong Kong people who say farewell to Hong Kong, a place which used to be their home but will never be the same again.

Hong Kong people had been migrating to other countries since 1980s for various reasons, such as the lack of faith in the future, and the hope for more opportunities in a foreign country. But after 30 June 2020, there is a new reason why some Hong Kong people have to leave their hometown. Stephen Nagy, who taught in Hong Kong and is now living in Tokyo, analyses the impact of Hong Kong’s National Security Law as follows:

Under the guise of national security and preserving order in Hong Kong, the new law seeks to bring stability to the economy and business environment in Hong Kong by criminalizing acts that threaten social (and national) stability. These have been labelled subversion, secession and terrorism.

Making the law even more problematic, these crimes punishable under the new law overlap with China’s “three evils” of ethnic separatism, terrorism and religious extremism, which have led to the creation of re-education camps in Xinjiang, the incarceration of more than 1 million ethnic Uighurs and the oppression of Tibetan minorities.

For Hong Kong citizens, this new law may affect their ability to protest peacefully to the local government or Beijing for fear of being labeled a secessionist, secessionist or worst a terrorist. It is also the end of the “One country, two systems” model that has protected their rights and privileges compared to mainland China. (10)

According to Hong Kong's *Basic Law*, "Hong Kong residents shall have freedom of speech, of the press and of publication; freedom of association, of assembly, of procession and of demonstration; and the right and freedom to form and join trade unions, and to strike." (Article 27) "No Hong Kong resident shall be subjected to arbitrary or unlawful arrest, detention or imprisonment." (Article 28) However, these freedoms will have to give way to national security. As observed by Nagy, "With the arrest of about 370 people, at least 10 of them for allegedly violating the new national security law on July 1, we should be realistic about China's intention to send the strongest of signals to Hong Kong citizens that there will be no more tolerance for mass protests." Peaceful protests during the 2014 Umbrella Movement and 2019 Anti-extradition Movement could become history.

It is a genuine crisis for all who regard Hong Kong as their home. Cheung Chan-fai, a philosopher born in Hong Kong in 1949, quotes the following lines of Hamlet in his forthcoming book, *HK: Existential Crisis: Ten Essays on Mourning the Death of Hong Kong*,

To be, or not to be, that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
And by opposing end them.

Cheung writes, "Anyone who has seen Shakespeare's plays must know this famous line. This existential question, this stage monologue, is so pungent and relevant to us in Hong Kong: To suffer the tyrannical arrows of fate in silence, or to stand up to the endless suffering of the world. Of course, we are not faced with the question of choosing between death and life, but the changes that have taken place in Hong Kong since last year [2019] have confronted us with our own existential question: if Hong Kong is dead, do we still want to stay and fight? Do we accept our fate of suppression? Or do we leave the city and go away?"

According to Basic Law, it is stated that "Hong Kong residents shall have freedom of movement within the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region and freedom of emigration to other countries and regions. They shall have freedom to travel and to enter or leave the Region. Unless restrained by law, holders of valid travel documents shall be free to leave the Region without special authorization." (Article 31) In the Chinese Memorandum of Sino-British Joint Declaration, China will permit Hong Kong people "to use travel documents issued by the Government of the United Kingdom for the purpose of travelling to other states and regions." Here, the "travel document" refers to BNO (British National Overseas) passport. However, the Hong Kong Government has recently announced that BNO is no longer recognized as a valid travel document and proof of identity. It "cannot be used for immigration clearance and will not be recognised as any form of proof of identity in Hong Kong." (11) BNO holders can still leave Hong Kong with Hong Kong Identity Card or Hong

Kong SAR Passport and use BNO to enter countries that recognize the passport.

While UK government will continue to recognize BNO passports, it also sets up a new scheme called BNO visa to BNO holders to live in UK for 5 years. However, it does not mean UK unconditionally grants the right of abode to all BNO passport/visa holders. Indeed, BNO holders still need 1 extra year to apply for settlement after 5 years in UK.

To be, or not to be, that is the question. And here are the answers: While many Fukushima people were forced to leave their contaminated hometown, many Hong Kong people are now considering leaving Hong Kong. Fukushima and Hong Kong people thought they are lonely orphans, but we can share our experience of how to overcome homelessness.

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NOTES

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4. Kobayashi Toshiaki, *Age of Homelessness (故郷喪失の時代)*. Tokyo: Bungeishunju, 2020.
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7. The Chinese of “Re-entry Permit” is 回港證, literally meaning the document to return to Hong Kong, and the Chinese of “Mainland Travel Permit” is 回鄉證, literally means the document to return to hometown.
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