

Ethics of Natural Disasters: Tanaka Shozo and the Ashio Mine Poisoning

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I would like to discuss the ethical aspects of natural disasters, with special reference to the Ashio Mine Poisoning Case in modern Japan. With the repeated "man-made floods" and the unprincipled decisions of policy-making, the Ashio Mine case epitomizes the case of environmental disasters where men's ethics are directly questioned. In reviewing the Ashio case, we also examine Shozo Tanaka's career as a prototype of the environmental activist and his discourse of natural conservation. In the face of economic and imperialist discourses in the modernizing nation, Tanaka envisions the establishment of a democratic state where voices of the weak and the oppressed will be heard and where Western technology will be seamlessly harmonized with the traditional values of the common people. Tanaka, in dealing with the unprecedented disaster in modernizing Japan, spotlights the locus of environmentalism where men's codes of behaviors play a significant part.

KEY WORDS

Shozo Tanaka, Ichibei Furukawa, Munemitsu Mutsu, Ashio Mine Poisoning, Copper Sulfate, Yanaka Village, Watarase River, river pollution, river control, Japanese modernization, environmental ethics, environmental justice



1. How Natural Are Natural Disasters?

The year 2004 marked one of the most grievous moments in the recent history of natural disasters in Japan as well as in Asia. An earthquake of a magnitude 6.8 shook the northwestern region of Japan to leave thousands of people homeless, while several typhoons hit and scraped the island nation, wreaking havoc to farmlands and national landscapes (The maximum velocity of the wind reached the record-high 60mps in Hiroshima.). On December 28, the gargantuan earthquake of a magnitude of 9.0 broke out off Sumatra Island, Indonesia, unleashing a series of towering tsunamis that swallowed more than 200,000 people along the coastlines of the Indian Ocean. Many of us are starting to ask ourselves whether these natural disasters breaking out so consecutively are genuinely natural, that is, whether these catastrophes are solely brought about by sudden whims of natural dynamics if they are inevitably related to each other as the consequence of human activities conducted too such an extent that they have destroyed the natural balance or equilibrium? Global warming and the rise of seawater temperature will obviously answer for the increased number of typhoons and their shifting courses. It is still a matter of conjecture, however, if the rise of seawater temperature would somehow affect the formation and movement of earth plates in Asia.

It should be remembered here that the concept of natural disaster or natural catastrophe is undoubtedly human, neither divinely ordained nor genuinely natural. To be more precise, we have to discriminate between two different concepts: natural phenomena and human

disasters. Earthquakes may be the results of irrational natural dynamics; whereas the levels and extent of disasters are always contingent upon the expanse of civilization and the condition of human activities. The ecological discourse of natural disasters, therefore, concerns not only the forms of violence charged too often against natural forces, but more directly the behaviors and ethical codes of humankind. This points toward another obvious fact that natural disasters most frequently take place on the edge or boundary, an interface zone in which natural forces compete with human activities. Thus, in the most dramatic and symbolic way, the ecological discourse of natural disasters spotlights the locus of environmentalism where men's ethics or codes of behaviors play a significant part.

In this paper, I would like to discuss the development of environmental literature in Japan, with special reference to the Ashio Mine Poisoning Case where natural forces collaborated with humans to bring about an unprecedented disaster in modern Japanese history.

2. Ashio Mine Poisoning Case

Here is what happened in Japan a century ago. The watershed region of the Watarase River in central Japan was once an expanse of unusually fertile land: the fields were rich in crops; and the river provided plentiful resources for local fishermen. The purity of the river water was such that it suited the local industry of textile and dye manufacturing; and farmers and villagers were fortunate enough to rake extra income from cultivating indigo and silkworms. The copper veins of Ashio mountains were discovered as early as in the 17th century; however, the mine was deserted for decades as it was believed to be almost depleted and not worth mining. There had been floods in the region now and then, but farmers knew that the temporary loss of crops would be ultimately compensated for by the enrichment of the soil that promised abundant harvests for the succeeding years. One of the traditional practices for fertilizing the soil in the region, in point of fact, was to dig out sedimentation from the riverbank and spread it out in the rice fields.

A radical change took place when Ichibei Furukawa, a heavy metal plutocrat, purchased the copper mine in 1877 and, having retooled with modern machinations, started to revitalize the production. Furukawa's success was no less than astonishing. In the interval of less than ten years, the production skyrocketed as much as eighty times, boosting Furukawa to emerge as the leading copper producer in Japan as well as in Asia. Critics and biographers would particularly emphasize the significance of the year 1884 when, due to the discovery of one of the largest veins in the region, the production increased ten times in two years. Furukawa's fame and prosperity, furthermore, were internationally acclaimed when Jarden Matteson, agent of the French Copper syndicate, proposed a three-year contract to Furukawa in 1888. Furukawa indeed became a national icon not only in terms of corporate success but also in the burgeoning possibilities of the modernizing nation: Furukawa led and in fact materialized the government's policy of "Fukoku Kyohei" (富國強兵 National Prosperity and Military Empowerment), an economic and imperialist discourse which culminated for the first time in the Sino-Japanese War in 1895. It was more than a mere coincidence that Munemitsu Mutsu, the Japanese delegate who signed the peace treaty with China in 1895, allegedly suggested to Furukawa the strategic advantage of purchasing the Ashio Mine and revamping copper production (Sae 51–52).

As early as in 1879, just a few years after Furukawa reopened the mine in Ashio, ecological disturbances became visible in many areas of the region. Fish was seen floating dead in the river; and trees and shrubs in the mountains suffered from a strange blight. Due to the increasing scarcity of resources, local river fishermen gradually disappeared: the number of fishermen, counted as many as 2,800 in 1881, plummeted to only 700 in 1888, and none in 1892. One of the local governments issued a warning against any practice of catching and selling fish from the river as they believed that the fish were poisoned. If this was all there was to the case, the incident would have remained solely one of the countless cases of industrial pollution. The uniqueness of Ashio's case, however, lies in the very fact that nature collaborated with humans in a way that devastated the local environment.

In the interval of 15 years from 1885 to 1900, there were as many as ten cases of major flooding in the Watarase watershed. The vicious circle was obviously induced by the rapid and excessive practice of mining as well as by the deforestation of the neighboring mountains: Furukawa had cleared an extensive area of forest to help fuel copper production; and the sulfuric gases from the mine also contributed to blight the nearby mountains. The toxic waste in the river water containing a large amount of copper sulfate destroyed the underbrush and bamboo thickets along the riverbank, which used to serve as natural embankment. The great flood of 1890 devastated the whole expanse of the Watarase watershed where 1,200 ha of fertile land were contaminated by the polluted water, and the land became virtually barren. A report from one of the local villages testifies that "there was no single crop produced that year" (Kinoshita 97). Six years later in 1896, the same regions were inundated by three major floods, which wreaked havoc on more than 500,000 people and chemically contaminated the expanse of up to 1 million ha. Health problems were urgent: the record showed a distinctly higher mortality rate in the region, especially among infants and young children; and more than 1,000 people allegedly died directly and indirectly from the contamination.

Furukawa's complicity in the disaster was not solely ascribed to the exploitation of the land. It was discovered later by an internal report that Furukawa in fact took advantage of the floods and criminally dumping waste ores in the river (Under the cover of rainstorms, they blasted off hills of waste ores with dynamite and, with hired hands of more than a hundred, disposed of ore in the flooding river.). It was not only with nature that Furukawa collaborated, but also with politics: the government and the district offices were involved not in the sense of averting disasters, but of perpetuating and even expanding the areas of contamination by buying villagers so as to suppress voices of protestation. Obviously alerted by the prospect of the polluted water penetrating into the Tokyo region, the national government also put forward a scheme to create a settling pond to dam the contaminated water before it reached the capital of the state. The idea was to swamp

the whole region of a low land village called Yanaka, thus attempting to contain the polluted water and thus to help deposit toxic materials.

3. Tanaka's Environmental Ethics

Shozo Tanaka (1841-1913), a Diet man representing the watershed region of the Watarase River, initiated and led protests against the Ashio Mine Poisoning Case and left behind an enormous number of documents, speech manuscripts, and political writings. Originally from a peasant family, Tanaka made his way through the local assembly to the first Imperial Diet, infinitely hoping that the advent of a representative government would produce a burgeoning democracy. With all of his appeals and efforts rejected or totally ignored, he gave up the Diet seat and decided to stay in Yanaka village with a few remaining villagers. Hence, Tanaka has been regarded as a prototype of environmental activism as well as a paragon of democracy in modern Japan.

Tanaka's argument, since his first appeal at the Diet, was consistent: the natural disasters in the Watarase region were thoroughly man-made. This "man-made flood," as he called it, obviously resulted from Furukawa's extensive development with total disregard for the regional environment. Trying to enlighten the local people who were deeply under the illusion, as we are still now, that the disasters had been solely due to violent natural forces, Tanaka underscored the ethical sides of the disasters. "There existed no natural disaster in the Watarase region," writes Tanaka in one of his essays, "say, thirty-five years ago. Farmers and fishermen even welcomed the comings of floods as they brought enrichment to the soil" (Hayashi 43).

By shifting the implications of natural disasters, Tanaka was enabled to confront more directly the question of human ethics and moral codes of behaviors: Who is responsible for creating and aggravating this "man-made" disaster? It is, in fact, the sheer force of Tanaka's rhetoric that translates the discourse of natural disasters into a moral interlude. "It is no lack of knowledge but malice," argues Tanaka in his Diet speech on February 26, 1897, "that licensed Furukawa to cut

down more than 100,000 ha of virgin woods in the mountains and ultimately deplete the water sources. It is more than evident that evils would ensue if mountain forests were destroyed. This is not an act of neglect but malice” (Kinoshita 129). Not only does Tanaka heap denunciation upon Furukawa, but he also criticizes local officials who joined to mediate between government-aided Furukawa and the local villagers for the benefit of the corporation. In the same speech, Tanaka states:

His (Furukawa’s) agents are behaving criminally, and their activities are rampant and more than dreadful. As I stated earlier, they denuded the mountains and would never intend to plant; they devastated more than 350,000 ha of land, stripped the villagers of their human rights, and poisoned 100,000 people. And they are simply gloating over their own prosperity. . . . Making profit in the true sense of the word is to earn benefits by honest dealings and, controlling one’s self-interest, work for the public good. Making money by a false and criminal practice cannot be called “profit.” There is no name for such kind of practice except for theft and piracy. (Kinoshita 141)

Since his first appeal to the Diet in 1891, Tanaka was well aware that he was not dealing with the criminality of the single mining company. He was, in fact, dealing with the Japanese government and the country’s modernizing process as a whole. It is true that Munemitsu Mutsu, then minister of agriculture and commerce, was a blood relation of Furukawa (Mutsu’s second son was adopted by childless Furukawa.); and Mutsu not only procrastinated in responses to Tanaka’s questionings, but also criminally defended Furukawa with a false tale of foreign-made machines being retooled to prevent further contamination. The linkage of complicity between the company and the government, however, was deeper and more extensive than the blood relationship. The national policy of accelerating heavy industry under the slogan of *Fukoku Kyohei* and *Shokusan Kogyo* (殖産興業 Industrialization and Production Increase) hanged heavily upon the

shoulders of the government officials; moreover, this economic and industrial discourse was further reinforced by the imperialist ambitions and by the two intervening wars with China and Russia that broke out consecutively in the interval of ten years.

Tanaka's only ground of protestation, then, was his constitutionalism and the question of principle. In the face of the economic and imperialist discourse, he tried to abide by the ideal of a modern nation with the principle of democracy. Tanaka states, "[M]y sole argument is that the government should stop this mining practice because it does more harm to the public good" (Kinoshita 127). "You would say that the Ashio Mine is Number 1 in the East, giving out more than 2 million yen worth of production, and therefore the most important mine to the national resources. But look at what the mine has been doing, to denude the mountains, on the one hand, and to contaminate 33,000 ha of fields and paddies, on the other. They are feeding poison to 100,000 people, and you would never realize that the true resources of the nation are people" (Kinoshita 130–31). Tanaka goes on to criticize the government's negligence for aggravating the damage and extending contaminated regions from 1,600 ha to 33,000 ha in six years, and then he enumerates 54 items of compensation for personal, local, and national damages.

For Tanaka, the citation of the economic and environmental cost and balance is indeed a pretext, and not a conclusion. His accusation is directly pointed toward the principle of the government. Somewhat reminiscent of Henry Thoreau's idea of civil disobedience, Tanaka appeals, "Despite the constitution that stipulates the protection of people and the public interest, the government would not seek to protect the people. If the government does not protect them, then the people will not have the duty to observe the law. It is not the people who do not obey the law, but the government is so behaving that the innocent people will not abide by the law" (Kinoshita 153). In his appeal at the Diet several days later, Tanaka says, "I admit that the present government is utterly incapable of dealing in a kind and sympathetic manner. Looking at these insincere answers, I have to conclude that the government is cruel, imbecilic, and not worth

trusting" (Kinoshita 163). He observes at one point that "There is no such thing as a Japanese government" (Kinoshita 151).

4. Water Runs Like a God

In his act of "Resistance to the Civil Government," Tanaka in a larger sense questions the idea of modernity itself. The significance of Tanaka's environmentalism, in point of fact, resides exactly in his obtuseness with which he adheres to the traditional values and native knowledge. Nowhere is his clash against the modernist values more distinctly visible than in his discourse on flood control. In 1896, the government established the first River Act which, modeled after the German method of river training, aimed to control river water by of straightening channels and building a higher embankment. Tanaka severely criticizes this discourse of flood control not only for its excessive development on the river banks but also for its total disregard of the geographical features of the region.

For one thing, Tanaka was opposed to the government's scheme of constructing a basin by swamping Yanaka village as he believed that it was another maneuver of the government to shift the locus of responsibility from Furukawa to natural disasters. But on a deeper level, Tanaka dealt with the changing concept of environmental ethics: he was unquestionably wary of the discontinuity or the radical disparity between the modern technological discourse and the traditional and native views of natural conservation as a whole. Tanaka's theory of flood control is a holistic one: he underscored the importance of mountains, rivulets and creeks as natural reservoirs and purifiers of water; and a whole sequence of geographical features, including gaps and bends, should be taken into account to keep rivers under control. River water, in other words, is a quintessence of nature; and it is best to leave it alone. "One should not violate geographical features," writes Tanaka, "because it is natural. If one violates natural features, it will do more harm than good" (Tanaka 532). Tanaka compares river water with railroads, a cultural icon of progress and modernization.

River water is not like railroads. Railroads may run in straighter lines by cleaving mountains and changing river courses. But it is clear that river water would not be like that. Roads and rivers are two different things. In brief, roads are governed by human laws, whereas water is not. If you try to govern it, it will rebel. Water is really like heaven and earth. Heaven and earth are so truly great and not to be governed by human laws, and that is the essence of water. Water runs like a god. (Tanaka 534)

Tanaka's emphasis upon local geography in the discourse of flood control was both scientific and spiritual. Having investigated the flooded areas, Tanaka convinced himself that the Western discourse of straighter channels and higher embankments did not relieve the situation but actually served to aggravate the disasters. In the national landscape surrounded by mountains and foothills, the discourse of flood control in the River Act could be no less than detrimental. Far more important in this context, however, is that Tanaka's theory of flood control increasingly deepens into a spiritual argument, profoundly tinged with religious overtones. Tanaka gives out warnings to engineers engaged in river control, dissuading them from any partisanship, biased feelings, greed, and self-interest. "Water is like a virtue" (Tanaka 542), writes Tanaka, "In controlling rivers, you should also have the mind of river water. In controlling rivers, you should also have the mind to love nature" (Tanaka 572). Here in Tanaka's argument about flood control, we witness the convergence of Christian ethics, Taoist philosophy, and animistic views of native cosmology. "Water truly runs like a god. Those who pollute the water pollute the god. Those who disturb the water disturb the god. Those who poison the water poison the god. Those who poison the water, destroying fish and shells and thus reducing men's life, will not elude punishment of the god" (Tanaka 573).

In her *Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow: Our Minamata Disease*, Michiko Ishimure draws upon Shozo Tanaka and his protest against the Ashio Mine Poisoning Case as the prototype of environmental movement in modernizing Japan. Ishimure, being a spokeswoman for

the most serious and extensive case of seawater pollution in the 1950s and 60s, discovers a streak of continuity between Tanaka's Ashio and her Minamata in the sense that the industrial pollution in the Japanese context is a direct outcome of social injustice based upon the discriminatory practices of modern capitalism. It is not in the narrower sense of environmental justice that Ishimure is arguing here, but in the sense that the national authorities, combined with industrial plutocrats, sanctioned and even encouraged by the economic and imperialist discourse in complete disregard for the lower strata of people and local communities. The case of Ashio mine poisoning, therefore, could be interpreted not only as a byproduct of industrialization but also as a manifestation of national guilt behind the array of rapid modernization and imperialist ambition in modern Japan.

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