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(STILL) COOL JAPAN

In a desperate attempt to cool down the overheated fuel rods at Fukushima, the Self-Defense Forces (SDF) sent in helicopters to dump seawater down on the power plants from 17 March 2011. The image of tiny-looking jets of water mercilessly getting dispersed in the wind before hitting the buildings elicited despair and even laughter from many Japanese. Yoshida Masao, who was the Fukushima Daiichi plant manager at the time, later described this act as ‘meaningless’ and ‘ineffective’, likening the image to ‘a cicada peeing’. This failed attempt was followed up by another more successful attempt, in which concrete pumping trucks—nicknamed *kirin* [giraffes] for their long ‘necks’, which can measure up to 60 metres—were brought in from China and the rest of Japan to pour water directly onto the plant. It seemed as though the image of Japan as a land of technology and ‘cool’ was crumbling further as these decidedly ‘uncool’ and low-tech solutions were broadcast around the world.

Japan has long been in possession of its own brand of soft power, which has been especially noticeable following WWII, when Japanese mass entertainment and technology started to be consumed all over the world (spearheaded by *Godzilla* in the 1950s). However, it was only in 2002 that Douglas McGray coined the term ‘Gross National Cool’ to explain Japan’s soft power and the economic value of Japan’s cultural exports was recognised by the government. Ironically, the subsequent government recognition and institutionalisation of Japan’s cool as the ‘Cool Japan Strategy’ by the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industries, only served to make the country less cool. There are also issues of appropriation. For example, with Japanese *manga* and technology having started off as imports from the West (or, at least, heavily influenced by the West), there

has always been a certain unease surrounding the promotion of these cultural products as being quintessentially Japanese. Further, Japan is also viewed to be in a technological identity crisis, in which it is unable to effectively market its consumer brands overseas, especially in comparison to its neighbour South Korea, who has had enormous success with both its cultural and technological exports in recent years (e.g. Samsung and K-POP).

Perhaps this context explains the massive box office success of the 2016 film *Shin Godzilla*, which portrays Japan as a country that has ‘still got it’ and gives hope to a Japanese audience feeling disillusioned by its own government, industries and people. The images contained in these works point to a Japan that is, although no longer number one in the economic sense of the 1970s and 1980s, very much still number one in culture and attitude. Conversely, Ruth Ozeki introduces a more philosophical perspective on what could be cool in post-disaster Japan, which is explored in the second half of this chapter.

***Shin Godzilla*’s Vision for a ‘Cool Japan’**

Hardcore Godzilla fans awaited the July 2016 release of *Shin Gojira* [*Shin Godzilla*, aka *Godzilla Resurgence*] with a healthy dose of scepticism. Not much was revealed about the film prior to its release, apart from the fact that it would be a live-action film co-directed by Anno Hideaki, the anime director of *Evangelion* fame (*Evangelion* is a cult anime series of the 1990s) and that it would feature many well-known mainstream actors, including Hasegawa Hiroki, Takenouchi Yutaka and Ishihara Satomi. Although it was expected that *otaku* with an interest in *Evangelion* would go and watch the movie, it was not a hotly anticipated mainstream release. However, as viewers started to emerge from half-empty movie theatres to rave about the film on social media, its popularity exploded to become an 8.2-billion-yen box office success by the end of the year. Part of the reason behind the film’s commercial success was that it was designed to be viewed multiple times. The numerous hints and intertextual references that bombarded the audience at super speed made it possible for viewers to discover something new during each viewing. Further, the film could be read as a kind of feel-good movie that represents an alternative reality and future in which the 3.11 disaster is overcome by the collaborative

effort of the Japanese. In portraying this feel-good alternative to the 3.11 disaster, it also managed to elevate certain aspects of Japanese culture to cool status and stroke the audience's nationalistic pride.

In many ways, *Shin Godzilla* can be thought of as a return to the 'roots' of the Godzilla series—the original Japanese *Godzilla* of 1954. The main plot of the film is just like for any other Japanese Godzilla film: a giant monster referred to as 'Godzilla' comes to Japan and causes havoc. The twist that is given to the 2016 version is that the only way to destroy the monster seems to be to drop an atomic bomb on Tokyo, which is a scenario that is narrowly averted by the quick thinking of the Japanese team headed by Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary Yaguchi Randō (played by Hasegawa). There have been many Godzilla films made in Japan over the past 65 years, but the most important point of comparison for *Shin Godzilla* is the original *Godzilla* of 1954 because they both encourage the audience to reflect on real-life nuclear disasters that directly impacted Japan. These two films are also different in nature to most of the Japanese Godzilla films that came in between, which feature other giant monsters that Godzilla fights against and are aimed at a younger audience.

The original *Gojira* [*Godzilla*] (1954) was inspired by the *Daigo Fukuryūmaru* (Lucky Dragon No. 5) incident in March of the same year, in which a group of Japanese tuna fishermen became exposed to nuclear fallout from the US hydrogen bomb testing at Bikini Atoll (the so-called 'Operation Castle'). This incident was met with outrage in Japan, where the memory of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was still fresh. The directors of the film, Honda Ishirō and Tsuburaya Eiji, made a film about a prehistoric creature that gets chased out of its habitat by nuclear bomb testing and goes on a rampage in Tokyo—Godzilla was born. With regards to this first Godzilla, Susan Napier (2006) says the following:

Many scholars, me included, believe that the initial Godzilla—with his links to nuclear testing and radiation—may in many ways be seen as a displaced version of the atomic bomb. His story and its ultimately happy outcome—Godzilla is vanquished through Japanese science—may, therefore, be read as a form of cultural therapy, allowing the defeated Japanese to work through the trauma of the wartime bombings in the scenes of panic or destruction and, with the film's happy end, giving them a chance to reimagine and rewrite their devastating defeat (p. 10).

While the US nuclear testing was a direct catalyst for the creation of the film, the atomic bomb was equally important as a source of inspiration for the monster.

Just like the first *Godzilla* was a form of cultural therapy that responded to the horrors of the atomic bombings, it is possible to read *Shin Godzilla* as a manifestation of the desire of the Japanese to overcome the 3.11 nuclear disaster. Featuring a monster that is inspired by that of the original film in design, the 2016 version clearly pays homage to this cultural therapy heritage. Set in late 2016, *Shin Godzilla* strongly references the triple disaster by replicating its four stages in the four Godzilla appearances in Tokyo: the earthquake, the tsunami, the helicopters pouring water on the Fukushima Daiichi power plant and then, finally, the ‘giraffe’ concrete pump vehicles coming to the rescue. The very first glimpse the audience gets of the 2016 Godzilla is its tail as it emerges from the sea—its long body resembling that of a catfish, which in Japanese folk mythology is said to be a divine messenger that brings about earthquakes. We soon find out that the monster in this film has the ability to rapidly metamorphose in response to various environmental and biological conditions, as the monster grows limbs and manages to walk along the Nomi River in Kamata, Tokyo, causing flooding and forcing residents to be chased by a wave of water in a manner reminiscent of the tsunami. By its third appearance in Tokyo, Godzilla can stand on its two feet, albeit gingerly and appears unfazed by the attacks of the helicopters of the SDF and the US strategic bombers (this SDF attack was highly reminiscent of the ‘cicada pee’ watering of 2011 in its ineffectiveness and visual composition). Further, by this point we find out that the monster is fuelled by nuclear power and leaves radioactive material and chaos in its wake, much like an angry, walking version of the Fukushima Daiichi power plant. The scenes of people taking pictures and videos of Godzilla on their mobile devices, sharing radiation measurements on social media networks such as Twitter and gathering in evacuation shelters after being instructed to leave the city also evoke the 3.11 disaster, except this time the consequences are borne by the capital instead of north-eastern Japan. As if all this was not enough, Anno’s intention to reference the triple disaster is made crystal clear in the way that Godzilla is described as *sôteigai* (beyond expectation) multiple times by one of the ministers (TEPCO used the same term to describe the tsunami height in 2011). In the finale, the monster becomes frozen in the middle of Tokyo thanks to the concrete pump vehicles, much like the unresolved situation in Fukushima.

Ultimately, Godzilla is a beast of a metaphor that represents different things to different people and this is part of its symbolic value. Some scholars have read Godzilla as a symbol of a larger power, such as a kind of divine *kami* figure, an allusion that is ‘especially evident in the scenes that herald his arrival’, marked by earthquakes and typhoons (Boss, 2006, p. 105). Katō Norihiro (Katō & Fujimura, 2016) believes that the monster serves as ‘an empty vessel for the unconscious’ for the Japanese, even capable of representing the Emperor (Godzilla’s suffering embodying his suffering as a marginal figure). However, it would be fair to say that both the 1954 and 2016 Godzillas have their origins in nuclear disasters and that the 2016 Godzilla would not have been created were it not for the 2011 triple disasters.

However, what I would like to highlight in my analysis of the 2016 *Shin Godzilla* is not what exactly Godzilla itself could represent, but rather the interesting ways in which the film portrayed previously criticised Japanese culture and values as being cool that results in a form of cultural therapy for the horrors of the 2011 triple disasters. This may be one of the reasons why the film could not replicate the huge commercial success it had domestically in overseas markets. Although the total gross box office figure in Japan was US\$75.4 million, the US figure was a modest US\$1.9 million and negligible in other markets. For comparison purposes, the film *Your Name* of the same year (covered in Chapter 4) grossed US\$235.3 million in Japan, US\$5 million in the US and a staggering US\$83.7 million and US\$27.9 million in China and South Korea respectively (*Shin Godzilla* was never released in China on the big screen, but the South Korean number makes a stark comparison).¹ The three main aspects of ‘Japan cool’ in the film that appealed to the domestic audience (but not to foreign audiences) were Japanese technology, *otaku* and corporate values. Although there is some overlap between these three aspects, I analyse them each below.

‘Cool’ Technology

The Fukushima incidents were not the first time Japanese technology came under fire in recent years. Since the 2000s, Japanese technology companies have been criticised for being unable to respond to global needs. Japan has become known as a kind of Galapagos, which has evolved

1 Numbers for the two movies taken from *Box Office Mojo*: www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?page=intl&cid=shingodzilla.htm; www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?page=intl&cid=yourname.htm (30 October 2018).

in isolation from the rest of the world, producing products that are highly specialised to its local market, yet unwanted overseas. As contemporaries in neighbouring countries such as Samsung, Huawei and Oppo become more and more successful in the global market and de-throne previous Japanese market leaders such as Toshiba and NEC, there has been a growing sense that Japanese companies are no longer having the global impact that they used to.

One of the possible reasons why *Shin Godzilla* made post-3.11 Japanese (but not other) audiences feel good may be because there is a long-running theme of 'Japanese technology saving the world (especially from US technology)' in Japanese Godzilla films, which is perhaps not appreciated as much by non-Japanese viewers. In the original *Godzilla* (1954), American science is shown to have created the monster by conducting nuclear tests in Bikini Atoll and destroying Godzilla's seafloor habitat. Conversely, in the Hollywood *Godzilla* (2014) by Gareth Edwards, the US nuclear tests are shown to have been well-meaning attempts at killing the monster. Japanese science is portrayed to be of a much more responsible variety in the 1954 original. Serizawa decides to take the secret of his 'oxygen destroyer' weapon to his grave by using it to kill both himself and Godzilla to prevent the possibility of this new and destructive technology being used for war. As Anderson (2006) explained:

At least one Japanese scientist thus proves himself to be more ethically engaged and concerned for others than the implicitly negligent US scientists who unleashed the A-bomb and the H-bomb upon humanity in general and Japan in particular (p. 25).

The 1954 film shows Japanese technology being used to undo the harmful consequences of US nuclear technology.

In *Shin Godzilla* (2016), Anno complicates the origins of the monster by characterising Godzilla as a prehistoric deep-sea creature that consumed some radioactive waste that was illegally dumped into the sea by various countries during the late 1940s and 1950s (including both Japan and the US). This can be read as reflecting the mixed origins of the Fukushima nuclear power plants, some of which were built by the General Electric Company and some of which were built by Toshiba or Hitachi. However, regardless of the origins of the monster, Japanese technology saves its motherland (and potentially the world) in the film. The UN Security Council plans to kill Godzilla by dropping a nuclear bomb on Tokyo (a move driven mainly by the US), but the Japanese Government manages

to prevent this.² After hypothesising that the monster uses its own blood to cool down its system, the Japanese team manages to feed Godzilla a large amount of blood coagulant to make it perform a kind of reactor scram, causing it to literally freeze in its tracks. The solution is highly symbolic of Japanese technology—it is not new or flashy, but requires high precision and involves a lot of blood, sweat, tears and overtime. The scenes of the blood coagulant being poured into Godzilla's mouth is almost identical to the real-life scenes of the concrete pumping vehicles pouring water on the Fukushima nuclear power plants that aired on television; except in this case the solution single-handedly solves the problem and evokes nationalistic pride (instead of shame) in the Japanese audience.

By the second half of the film, it becomes clear that the battle of Japan v. Godzilla has turned into that of Japanese technology v. US technology. At first, the Japanese SDF deploy AH-64 Apache helicopters to first fire their autocannons, then their 30 mm chain gun rounds, then rockets to no avail. Tanks and self-propelled howitzers follow suit, but Godzilla remains completely unscathed and unfazed. Japanese officials can do nothing but watch in awe or grit their teeth when American forces drop Massive Ordnance Penetrator bombs on the creature from their B-2 stealth bombers, which at least has the effect of injuring Godzilla and angering it. This display of American might is necessary to make the eventual Japanese victory as awe-inspiring as possible.

From the beginning, the film repeatedly makes reference to the issues surrounding US–Japan relations, underscoring this tension. The US is portrayed as self-serving and untrustworthy. For example, when asked whether the US scientists have managed to make any progress on understanding Godzilla, Yaguchi comments that he has been told 'no', but 'that may not be the truth' and that 'it's better not to rely on them now'. Further, it is revealed by Kayoko Ann Patterson, a Japanese–American who is sent as a special envoy from the US president (and whose own internal conflict mirrors the tension between the two countries), that the US had been aware of the existence of Godzilla all along, prior to the incidents. The US remains completely self-interested from the start, dumping nuclear waste into the Pacific Ocean, then not bothering to tell Japan about the monster that is born in its midst and then deciding to drop a B83 nuclear

2 The idea of using nuclear weapons to combat Godzilla is not unique to the 2016 version. For example, the US and the Soviet Union attempt to use tactical nuclear weapons in Japan in the 1984 Godzilla film directed by Hashimoto Kōji, but they eventually give up on the idea.

bomb on Tokyo to prevent the 13 per cent chance of Godzilla landing on the West Coast of its country. It becomes clear at this point in the film that to let the US bomb Tokyo under these circumstances would signify for Japan a complete acceptance of this relationship of subjugation and exploitation.

This is the tension at play during the climax of the film, when the countdown towards the nuclear bomb detonation begins and the Japanese team rush to prepare their alternative 'Yaguchi plan' before this happens. At this stage, the American scientists who had joined the team earlier are nowhere to be seen because they have clearly abandoned the mission (relying on the nuclear alternative) and it is up to the remaining Japanese scientists and politicians to gather enough blood coagulant, vehicles and manpower to conduct the Yaguchi plan. While the US attempts to blindly obliterate Godzilla by using a thermonuclear bomb, the Japanese team attempt to try and understand the monster and decipher the hints left by Maki Goro, a former Japanese scientist who was working on Godzilla by request from the US Department of Energy. The US forces treat Godzilla as a kind of vermin that must be eliminated, but the Japanese characters in the film repeatedly refer to its 'God-like', awe-inspiring nature by using terms such as *kami* (God, spirits) or *sen'nin* (a mountain-dwelling immortal sage, which also evokes oft-repeated debates on nuclear power as a kind of 'fire of Prometheus', a technology that is beyond the full understanding of humans). Directors Anno and Higuchi further underscore this divine portrayal by employing a motion capture of *Nō* artist Nomura Mansai's slow movements to give the monster a majestic presence on the screen.

The ability of the Japanese team to understand Godzilla as an unprecedented form of being, instead of just viewing it as an enemy to be bombed and attacked, is symbolised by university professor Hazama Kunio's solution to decode the map left by Maki Goro. The lines on what appeared to be a map of Godzilla's cellular processes represent folding lines and the map can only be read and understood when it is folded into its 3D *origami* shape (*origami* being a piece of Japanese culture that has cutting-edge scientific applications such as nanotechnology and space satellites). This breakthrough led the committee to discover that Godzilla's cells are able to break down any element that it encounters to power itself through nuclear fusion (meaning it can survive in air or water, without eating), but also that there is a type of extremophile bacteria that lives on these cells, which block this reaction to some extent. Through an extremely advanced understanding of biology, the Japanese team manage to produce

both the blood coagulant and this extremophile bacteria to be fed to the monster at the same time, to prevent the blood coagulant being broken down by Godzilla's cells. The details of whether the science is sound or not is arguable, but the main message is clear—Japanese science is so sophisticated that scientists can fully understand a creature like Godzilla within a matter of days and even reproduce from scratch the bacteria that is present in its body.

Japan's ethical science eventually wins over the world and many countries agree to lend their supercomputing power to Japan, despite the risk of having their valuable research stolen, and even the US participates in the plan in the end, by contributing high-end drones (these are crucial for the execution of the plan, along with the *shinkansen* bullet trains and the commuter trains that transport many Tokyoites every day—the recognition of which adds another element of pride and enjoyment for the audience). The success of the plan represents a victory of Japan's cool technology over the brute force approach of the US. Japan decides to take the humane approach of coexisting with the frozen Godzilla and brings the world together in the process. As a final blow to the US plan, the very last shot of the film, showing winged human-like creatures frozen mid-evacuation from Godzilla's tail, points to the possibility that the US strategy would have been completely ineffective, aside from the fact that a nuclear bomb would have been detected by Godzilla's radar and shot down in the first place, the monster would have simply metamorphosed during this time into winged humanoids who would have flown away from its tail and wreaked havoc on earth. That is, only Japanese technology was capable of saving the day.

'Ota-cool'

What is interesting about this technology is that it is a bottom-up strategy, devised by the rag-tag ad-hoc committee that Yaguchi Randō gathered, made up of 'Kasumigaseki [an area of Tokyo where government offices are located] misfits who will never be promoted anyway: lone wolves, weirdos, otaku, trouble-makers, outcasts and academic heretics', among others. This creates an environment in which these unique individuals can voice their opinions and ideas freely, and it is this team that ultimately decode the information left by Maki Goro, find out essential information about Godzilla and come up with the plan for freezing it. What these oddballs lack in communication and social skills, they make up for in

their highly specialised technical expertise, a characterisation that is often employed to describe the *otaku*. This is significant because the *otaku* were the initial supporters and the target audience of the film (as I mentioned earlier, Anno has a semi-divine reputation among this community as the creator of the *Evangelion* series).

Here I am not using the term *otaku* in a derogatory sense, but in a sense that is closer to *Ota-king*, from Okada Toshio's (2000) definition (Okada is an *otaku* scholar and a well-respected *otaku*): the *otaku* is *not* just 'those who like anime, manga and games', which leads to them being 'anti-social and gloomy people who stay at home all day' (p. 13), but instead positively defined as 'a new type of human, born in the twentieth century, who have an extremely evolved sensitivity to moving images' (p. 14). In Okada's definition (p. 14), *otaku* have 'an evolved sense of vision' developed from hours upon hours of watching different anime frame-by-frame to detect the slightest differences in style between different animation directors and also to gain a deeper understanding of how these directors create their works within their budget limitations. In short, *otaku* are a species of advanced viewers who seek satisfaction in their ability to analyse these subculture works deeper than the average viewer by understanding external factors such as budgets, industry trends and production processes, but also the highly technical aspects of content creation. Although this may result in the 'antisocial and gloomy' image from the rest of society, many *otaku* are very social when it comes to discussing and sharing their findings and quite happy in their belief that their refined eye allows them to enjoy content much more than other non-*otaku* viewers.

The Godzilla team members can also be considered to be *otaku* who have an extremely refined eye when it comes to their respective fields (e.g. molecular structures, computers, trains and weapons), but do not bother with other details of their lives, such as appearance or what others think about them. Most committee members speak like fast-forwarded, expressionless robots, except when they make an exciting discovery regarding Godzilla. It is clear that Anno knew some of his audience members will be of this *otaku* type because of his *Evangelion* past and that he was trying to appeal to this crowd. For example, the extreme amount of information displayed on the screen every second in a similar way to *Evangelion* (e.g. names of people with their titles, names of government committees and the type of bomb, aircraft or train that is being used to

attack Godzilla) is clearly not designed to be fully read and comprehended by a casual one-time viewer, but rather for the *otaku*-type viewer to decode during the course of multiple viewings of the film.³

What Anno perhaps did not expect so much is that these *otaku* characters would be received so positively by the mainstream audience and not just his hardcore *otaku* fans. This was evidenced by the fact that some of the most popular characters in the film were Ogashira Hiromi and Yasuda Tatsuhiko, the two *otakus* in the committee played by Ichikawa Mikako and Takahashi Issei, rather than those played by the headliner actors Takenouchi Yutaka and Ishihara Satomi. Ogashira Hiromi's popularity in particular was extraordinary, with numerous fans and professional *manga* artists alike submitting illustrations of the character on Twitter under the #Ogashira Hiromi hashtag.⁴ In the film, Ogashira is a socially awkward young woman who wears no makeup and expressionlessly talks to people without looking into their eyes, much like Yasuda—hardly a recipe for a conventional film heroine (unlike the glamorous Kayoko Ann Patterson, played by Ishihara Satomi). It was the tiny hint of a smile she shows at the end, when she realises that the radiation damage left by Godzilla in Tokyo was not as bad as it had previously been believed, that resulted in a huge *gyappu moe* (a term that describes falling in love with anime or manga characters who display seemingly contradictory traits or gaps, such as a handsome and sophisticated-looking man who is very clumsy) sensation—so much so, that 24 different versions of this scene (shot from different angles) were included in the bonus footage of the Blu-ray edition of the film, along with numerous versions of a scene in which Yasuda screams and jumps up and down upon finding out that the monster is radioactive, in another rare display of emotion.

One factor that perhaps made these *otaku* characters more digestible for the mainstream audience was that they were not the so-called *kimo-ota* (disgusting *otaku*) who dress unfashionably and are unfit and ungroomed.

3 There are many other parallels drawn between the film and the *Evangelion* series: most noticeably the music, which was created by Sagisu Shirō for both films (one song, 'Decisive Battle', is used in exactly the same way before each battle), as well as the unresolved nature of the ending. Various lines and appellations similar to *Evangelion* are scattered throughout *Shin Godzilla*. For example, an important strategy in *Evangelion* is called *Yashima sakusen* (the Yashima strategy), while the final strategy in *Shin Godzilla* is *Yashiori sakusen* (the Yashiori strategy). *Yashima sakusen* also evokes the 3.11 disaster because some *Evangelion* fans were using the term to describe their efforts to save electricity, while nuclear power plants were closed down in Japan.

4 Some examples of this can be seen on *Togetter*, a Japanese Twitter aggregator website: togetter.com/li/1012670 (30 October 2018).

Even Yasuda, who is arguably the most *otaku* character in the film (being the only character who is explicitly referred to as one), with his twitchy face and unfitted suit, is portrayed as stylish in some ways, with his iPhone, MacBook Air and limited edition 18k gold Apple Watch, whereas all his bureaucrat colleagues type away on their grey Fujitsu and Panasonic laptops. In a memorable escape scene, Yasuda is seen calmly grabbing his MacBook—clearly his only important possession—and walking away while everyone else scrambles to gather their belongings. Likewise, although Yaguchi is a model train *otaku*, who displays his collection proudly in his office (and perhaps also had a hand in coming up with using trains as a weapon in the final battle against Godzilla), he is without doubt a cool character, who is not only extremely capable but also always dressed sharply—even when he ‘hasn’t showered for days’, his shirt looks as white and crisp as ever, his hair without a trace of oil and his face cleanly shaven.

In the past, images of the *otaku* ranged from creepy and dangerous (as exemplified by the paedophile and necrophile ‘*otaku* murderer’ Tsutomu Miyazaki) to unfashionable and socially awkward (as exemplified by the *densha otoko* [train man] whose successful love story became a social phenomenon around 2004/05). In contrast, the *otaku* qualities of the committee members portrayed in *Shin Godzilla* are portrayed and received as being cool, representing a 180-degree turn from these negative images. *Shin Godzilla* accurately reflects the heightened status of *otaku* in Japanese society today, in which *otaku* are now welcomed as valuable tourists and consumers by small Japanese towns and *otaku kei danshi* (*otaku*-type men) are even viewed as the most desirable type of men for marriage by some women, due to their perceived loyal nature.

‘Shachi-cool’

This brings us to the third feel-good aspect of the movie, which is that the heroes are not superhuman beings, but rather average Japanese who work as bureaucrats, chemical engineers, plant workers, firefighters, SDF and administrative assistants who bring rice balls to committee members. The implication is that it is through the collective effort of all Japanese citizens that Godzilla, or the 3.11 disaster, would be overcome. There is no one ‘hero’ in this film—while leadership roles such as the prime minister are important, his task is limited to listening to advice and putting an administrative stamp of approval on their ideas (after asking ‘where do I put the stamp?’). At each stage of the fight against Godzilla, the involvement

of numerous different departments and people is emphasised, with the camera rapidly cutting between characters every few seconds for most of the film. In one scene in which the team are analysing the decoded results of Maki Goro's map, provided by super computers from all over the world, the results are displayed in the foreground with the committee members gathered round in the background, giving the audience the impression that they are inside the computer that they are looking at. The focus on the screen is rarely on one character, but rather on a group of characters, gathered around the meeting table or a computer.

These characters are not just great team members, they also work incredibly hard. It would not be far-fetched to describe these individuals as a kind of *shachiku* (corporate livestock), which is a term that has become popular in Japan in recent years to describe employees who become so enslaved to their bosses and exploitative companies (often called 'black' companies) that they lose their free will and mindlessly work long hours. In one scene, followed by an aerial shot of the protesters outside of the National Diet building, the staff inside are shown to be exhausted and falling asleep in the most impossible positions on their chairs or their desk as a man collects a large rubbish bag full of empty instant ramen bowls. Morning comes and the delivery of rice balls and tea creates an excuse for a brief break. During this break, Shimura, Yaguchi's right-hand man, reveals that some team members have not gone home or seen their families for many days, despite having permission to do so and are all working on what they can, without even being told what to do. What is perhaps more surprising to a Western audience is that this is talked of as a most noble act that 'really moves' Shimura and leads Yaguchi to conclude that 'this country is not half bad'. Being a good worker is clearly shown to be more important than being a good father, mother, husband or wife during a crisis situation.

As a Godzilla film, *Shin Godzilla* is unique in its complete lack of romance or familial and personal relationships. Of the committee members, only Mori, who acts as a vice-chairperson to Yaguchi, is shown to have family (a photo of his wife and baby is shown on his mobile phone background for a brief second during the aforementioned break) and no one, apart from him, attempts to contact their loved ones despite the emergency. The heroes are shown to be utterly devoted to their jobs to the point of absurdity (one would assume that in real life, there would be at least a few staff members who decide to flee or at least not want to volunteer to work 24/7 under these circumstances) and this is presented as an admirable trait that is necessary to overcome national crises such as a Godzilla

attack (or, symbolically, the 3.11 triple disaster). These hardworking men defeat Godzilla by holding meetings, following necessary bureaucratic procedures, stamping documents, bowing to each other and working overtime, instead of going home and looking after their family, just like any good worker.

The film has the effect of making modern-day ‘corporate livestock’ audiences feel good about their jobs and their lifestyles, in what could be termed ‘shachi-cool’, in the same vein as ‘ota-cool’. This is a clever strategy on Anno’s part because many of the audience members who grew up watching the *Evangelion* series in their adolescent years and who became adults in the ‘employment ice age’ of 1993–2005 are now likely to be part of this unmarried, ‘corporate livestock’ group. This is in contrast to the age group of their parents and superiors, the so-called *dankai* (baby boomer) generation, for whom the economic situation was ideal throughout their different life stages. In the film, this generation is depicted from the viewpoint of the *shachiku* generation, as mostly inept and narrow-minded individuals, who are unable to adapt to change. At the beginning of the film, following the Aqualine underwater tunnel accident in Tokyo, the prime minister laughs off Yaguchi’s idea that the accident may have been caused by a giant underwater creature. This is immediately followed by a shot of Godzilla’s tail rising up from the sea, proving the prime minister and his cronies wrong. Many comic relief moments in the film are based around these older characters, such as the prime minister asking, ‘What? I decide here? Now!? You didn’t tell me about this in advance’ when asked to give permission to deploy the SDF against Godzilla (showing that the prime minister does not usually make any real decisions), or the exchange of ‘what!? it moves?’ and ‘of course, it’s alive’ by his ministers, upon receiving the report that Godzilla is moving towards the Tama River (demonstrating how slow these old men are at ‘getting’ new concepts). Conveniently, this older generation ends up being killed off in the third Godzilla attack on Tokyo because the helicopter that was carrying them to safety gets hit by the atomic laser beam emitted from the monster’s mouth. The extent to which this made the audiences of the film feel good is shown by the loving nickname used by fans online to refer to this incident: *naikaku sōjishoku bi-mu* (Cabinet *en masse* resignation beam).⁵

5 Another important reason why Godzilla fans used this nickname instead of referring to the incident was that they were trying to prevent the spread of spoilers to encourage more people to go watch the film. However, the name clearly makes a joke out of the situation.

The film presents a convenient alternative reality to 3.11 for the long-suffering *Evangelion* generation, in which the *rōgai* (a derogatory term used to describe old people who are useless and cause others trouble, without realising it themselves), who usually boss them around and make them do unnecessary tasks, are killed off and the younger generation become the heroes who save Japan. In doing so, it also portrays the *shachiku* as a kind of cool figure—highly competent and hardworking who are simply unable to reach their full potential due to the older generation. This can be seen as a return to the positive concept of the *kigyō senshi* (corporate warriors) of the 1990s, except that the *shachiku* is a much more passive figure, preferring to work in groups rather than to stand out through individual achievements.

This kind of corporate *shachiku* mentality is even carried over to the SDF. For example, when a platoon leader is asked whether they will ask for volunteers to go and attack Godzilla from a helicopter, which is an unprecedented and dangerous mission as the target may behave in an unexpected (*sōteigai*) manner, he simply replies that they will follow their usual rotation because they have all been ready for the worst since they joined the SDF. While this is a tear-jerking moment for the audience, it is doubtful that most members of the SDF, which has never been dispatched to combat, have actually prepared themselves for the possibility of death in combat when they signed up (as evidenced by an earlier attack scene by the Tama River when a nervous Private First Class is heard saying, ‘It’s still hard to believe we will actually be fighting here’). In this way, this *shachiku* mentality is also highly nationalistic and current in the context of a Japan that is currently debating whether to expand the range of the SDF’s activities by changing the Constitution. It may also be important to note here that the film had the full cooperation of the SDF, which the SDF famously only allows for films that portray the forces in a positive way.

The speech delivered to the SDF by Yaguchi further reinforces this romanticisation of self-sacrifice for one’s own country:

During the *yashiori* plan, you may be hit by radiation beams or suffer from acute radiation poisoning. I cannot guarantee that you will make it back alive. However, I am begging you to go! Our nation’s power is gathered here today. The SDF is the last bastion of hope for defending this country. I am entrusting you with the future of our country. That is all.

It is possible to read all this as a kind of big ‘black joke’—it is clear that the ‘real Japan’ is not like this at all, the older generation are still alive and will not be suddenly killed off by a single radiation beam, the *shachiku* are more likely to commit suicide or become depressed than to defeat monsters and Japanese technology has not been cool for many decades. Did Anno want the Japanese audience to reflect on how terrible they really are, instead of believing that they would be capable of overcoming such a national crisis? One could say that the old scientists in the film, who said there is nothing that can be said about Godzilla using the current level of science, are absolutely correct—no one can understand such a beast, let alone find a way to beat it in a matter of days. We could even say that the decidedly uncool idea of nuking Tokyo and sacrificing most of the country to save the world from the monster seems like a much more reliable solution, given the circumstances.

Katayama Morihide, a political scientist who also writes widely on music, suggests that one possible reading is to view the second half of the film as a fantasy, which is contrasted against the reality of the first half (Katayama & Yamanaka, 2016). That is, the world does indeed ‘end’ following Godzilla’s rampage in Tokyo and what happens afterwards (the Yashiori plan and its success) is just an ideal scenario of ‘what could have been’ for the film and also for Fukushima. He points out that the music also underscores this. During the scenes of the catastrophe, the melancholic chorus of the classical-style music in the background evokes a Gregorian *Dies irae* melody, a symbol for the Last Judgement, often used for Requiem Mass. However, after this, from when Yaguchi’s team rebuilds in the city of Tachikawa, 40 km west of central Tokyo, the music changes to a mix of upbeat and dramatic melodies from *Evangelion* and *Uchū daisensō* [*Battle in Outer Space*] (1959),⁶ which helps the audience to suspend disbelief when the young government suddenly starts to function and everything falls into place to defeat the monster.

Whether we read the ending as being realistic or not, I argue that it was Anno’s intention that the film would be read in many different ways. In the film, Maki Goro leaves the following cryptic words with his notes, before disappearing: ‘I did as I pleased. Do whatever you want’. The 2016 collection of essays by *Nikkei Business Online*, which contains the above

6 Composer Ifukube Akira, who created the soundtrack for the 1954 *Godzilla*, also created the soundtracks for *Battle in Outer Space*. The two films were both made by the Honda Ishirō and Tsuburaya Eiji duo, who created many other films together for Toho.

Katayama article, is a testament to the fact that many have taken Anno up on this challenge and have developed their own readings. However, for the general Japanese public, I argue that Anno's film played an important role of psychologically healing the nation from post-3.11 frustration and anger, like the original post-war *Godzilla* of 1954 helped to restore faith in the nation. By elevating Japanese technology, *otakus* and *shachikus* to cool status, Anno shows that the Japanese are very much capable of dealing with a disaster like Fukushima in the future, so long as the old *rōgai* are removed and the young talents and misfits are able to shine.

Quantum Zen as a Philosophy for the Twenty-First Century in Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being*

The portrayal of Japan as continuing to be relevant in the modern world was not limited to tangible areas such as advanced technologies. The following example that I explore involves the portrayal of Zen Buddhism, meditation practices and the concept of *ikigai* as philosophies that continue to be cool and globally helpful in the twenty-first century. Whether people are conscious of their influence, there is no doubt that Eastern philosophies are frequently relied upon in the West as ways to relieve the tensions of modern corporate life, as well as to find meaning in life, such as yoga and the mindfulness movement. More recently, the concept of *ikigai* (a Japanese version of *raison d'être*) took off outside of Japan with the publication of Héctor García and Francesc Miralles's book, *Ikigai: The Japanese Secret to a Long and Happy Life*, which was also popular in other Western languages such as French and Spanish (first published in Spanish in 2016). *Ikigai* has now become the next lifestyle 'it' word, along with Danish *hygge* or the Swedish *lago* and has inspired numerous other publications.

Ruth Ozeki's 2013 English-language novel, *A Tale for the Time Being*, portrays Japan as a centre of this spiritual cool. An American-Japanese author raised in Connecticut and an ordained Buddhist priest who currently divides her time between the US and Canada, Ozeki is undoubtedly well placed to be a proponent of Zen. Ozeki demonstrates the continued power of Japanese ways of thinking in three main ways: first, by showing the power of Buddhist 'radical interconnectedness' in bridging gaps between people; second, by revealing how Zen can be

used to combat contemporary social issues such as suicide; and third, by exploring the concept of *ikigai*, although her teenage protagonist and her grandmother use the term ‘superpower’ instead. In doing so, Ozeki contributes to the more recent representation of Zen as a philosophy and logical way of thinking that can help modern humans to find their purpose in life, rather than being a religion (as the term ‘Buddhism’ evokes to most Western readers). Although Ozeki is not the first to introduce Zen Buddhism to the West, it is still not widely regarded as a solution to real-life problems, such as suicide prevention in the Western world. Especially in the US, Zen Buddhism was consumed by most as a stylised, frivolous fad, even when it was at the peak of its popularity, in the late 1950s (Iwamura, 2011, pp. 33–35). Although this may be changing today with newer forms of Buddhism-based practices such as the mindfulness movement, meditation continues to be associated with relaxation in most of the Western world rather than the serious philosophy that Ozeki attempts to describe in her book.

A Tale for the Time Being received wide critical acclaim for its thoughtful combination of the *Bildungsroman* genre and philosophical explorations. The book was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize and won the Los Angeles Times Book Prize for Fiction and UK Independent Booksellers Award. It has also been translated into French, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, Russian, Hungarian and Japanese. The plot is deceptively simple: a Japanese-Canadian writer, Ruth (a semiautobiographical character based on Ozeki), picks up a freezer bag containing a diary and other valuable items that seems to have washed ashore on Cortes Island, British Columbia, as a result of the 3.11 tsunami. The diary, which is concealed between the covers of Proust’s *A la recherche du temps perdu*, contains the story of a teenage girl, Nao, who spent her childhood in the US—her father worked as an IT professional in Silicon Valley before the dot-com bubble burst. Back in Japan, Nao faces horrific bullying at her school as well as her father’s repeated suicide attempts and depression as a result of not being able to provide for his family. Hope is presented towards the end of Nao’s story when she receives the care and wisdom of her great-grandmother Jiko, who is a 104-year-old ex-anarchist poet and a Zen Buddhist nun. The novel begins in Nao’s voice, as she decides to tell the story of her great-grandmother’s life in the diary of Nao’s last days on earth, before she commits suicide. Through the act of reading the diary and working through the other clues in the freezer bag, Ruth’s life becomes intertwined with Nao’s and Ruth becomes more and more

obsessed with Nao and her current situation; even though, as her husband Oliver reminds her, the diary was written more than a decade ago and it is probably already too late to save Nao. Did Nao commit suicide? Was she a victim of the tsunami? The reader never finds definite answers to these questions. Instead, the resolution of the book lies in an exploration of Zen Buddhism, quantum physics⁷ and the interconnectedness of all things.

Ozeki had written Nao's story prior to 3.11, but had spent many years attempting to find an appropriate reader for the diary; she had even experimented with a nameless, genderless, ageless reader (2013d). However, the events of 3.11 inspired Ozeki to write herself, as well as her husband and her surroundings into the story, which was something she had avoided before as she considered it to be too 'self-conscious' (Ozeki, 2013c). The addition of Ozeki into the novel establishes a link between Nao's pre-3.11 story and 3.11, as well as between the novel and the reality of 3.11. By inserting herself into the novel, Ozeki dissolves the various boundaries between self and other—between herself and her readers, non-Japanese and Japanese, as well as non-victims and victims. This is just one of the ways in which the Buddhist concept of interconnectedness is manifested in the novel. In Ozeki's (2013b) words: 'Two of the most important tenets of Zen Buddhist philosophy are impermanence and no-self. All phenomena are impermanent. As such, nothing has a fixed self or identity, but instead, all things exist in a state of radical interconnectedness'. Ozeki attempts to transcend the self-versus-other binary and show that identity, on both personal and national levels, is constantly in flux, existing in a web of complex interactions.

Having a hybrid identity and being an author, Ozeki's alter ego Ruth is a highly appropriate reader for Nao's story, who bridges the gap between Western readers and the 'Japanese' Nao. At first, Ruth is somewhat tormented by her status as a spectator. Ruth admits to 'feeling vaguely prurient, like an eavesdropper or a peeping tom', although she also points out that novelists in general 'spend a lot of time poking their noses into other people's business' (p. 27). Ruth's genuine concern for Nao's wellbeing eventually overrides this hesitance. When beachcombers hear about Ruth's discovery and come to hunt for washed-up safes and valuables on her island, she gets angry at them, even though she has decided to keep Nao's freezer bag, as her neighbour and friend Muriel

7 Quantum physics or quantum mechanics deals with physical phenomena at an atomic and subatomic level, where the laws of classical physics no longer apply.

points out. Being a Japanese-American, Ruth is also able to add footnotes to Nao's story, providing her own insight and explanations where Japanese terminology and concepts are used. This helps Ruth to better understand Nao's story because her Japanese vocabulary was 'out of date', making her resort to internet searches for pop culture references (p. 50). The footnotes are not limited to definitions of Japanese terms and include personal remarks such as '88. Miyagi ... Sendai is in Miyagi!' (p. 206) when Ruth realises that Nao is about to go to an area of Japan that was hit hard by the earthquake and tsunami. There are some footnotes that refer to the appendices at the end of the novel, such as '9. For more thoughts on Zen moments, see Appendix A' (p. 20). In some instances, Ruth does not have the answers. For example, she is unable to find the *kanji* for the name of Jiko's temple (p. 247) and her limited knowledge of French means that she incorrectly interprets the line in Monique Serf's song *Le mal de vivre*, 'vaille que vive', as 'It's brave to live?' (p. 314).⁸ Although these footnotes help Ruth, they are also useful for the reader who requires these further explanations, which raises the question of whether it is really Ruth (the character) that wrote them or Ozeki (the author). Strangely, there are also footnotes in Ruth's part of the story (pp. 103, 143), which has the effect of dissolving the boundaries between Ruth and Nao, as well as between Ozeki and the reader (the layering bringing to light the double role of Ozeki as author and reader of her own writing). The numbering of the footnotes is continuous throughout the novel, from the Dōgen and Proust quotes that are provided at the beginning of each of the four parts of the novel to Nao and Ruth's respective stories and also in the appendices.

Radical Interconnectedness

As mentioned earlier, Ozeki demonstrates her idea of 'radical interconnectedness' most noticeably through the relationship between Ruth and Nao. Ruth begins to feel 'oddly protective of Nao and her diary' (p. 212) as she reads through her story, even feeling 'a strong sense of almost karmic connection with the girl and her father' (p. 447). Although she becomes increasingly curious about Nao and searches for clues on the internet, Ruth decides not to rush ahead and 'read at the same rate she'd lived' (p. 537), so that 'she could more closely replicate Nao's experience' (p. 63). Ruth becomes so involved in Nao's story that she begins to

8 It should be 'we must live the life we have. We must soldier on', according to Ruth's French neighbour, Benoit (p. 220).

influence it herself. For example, words disappear from the last pages of the diary as Nao finishes recounting past events and catches up to her present, her 'now' (the homonymy is particularly apt here). Ruth makes the words reappear by responding to Nao's cry of help through a dream. In an unexpected surrealist twist to an otherwise very realistic story, it is this dream encounter that reunites Nao with her father, which creates a happy ending for her story. There is a sense that Nao (the author of the diary) is being helped by Ruth (the reader of the diary) just as much as Nao helps Ruth.

Ozeki's Zen 'radical interconnectedness' is presented as being as much a solution for the problems afflicting post-3.11 Japanese society as it is for her post-3.11 novel. Most importantly, the concept is helpful in alleviating the strict demarcation between victim and non-victim that often occurs after a disaster. For example, those who are direct victims of 3.11 have the tendency to distance themselves from non-victims or indirect victims because they feel as though non-victims cannot possibly have a full understanding of their devastation.⁹ This results in a situation in which only disaster victims are engaged with disaster-related issues and non-victims feel as though it is somehow wrong to get involved. Ozeki's radical interconnectedness provides an alternative to this, giving non-victims the right to care. Ruth finds that even though 'she received confirmation that the people she knew were safe ... she couldn't stop watching' the footage of the tsunami (p. 165), because 'the images pouring in from Japan mesmerized her'. Ruth is a non-victim, who does not personally know anyone involved in the disaster (with the exception of Nao, who may or may not have been a victim), but she still cares deeply about all those affected. Nao's story seems to awaken this sense of interconnectedness in Ruth, reminding her of the impact such events can have on her own life, even if it is not immediately visible. The reader is also led to empathise with the suffering of disaster victims such as Mr Nojima, a sanitation worker who lost his whole family and house in the tsunami, speaking in a video that Ruth is watching. Through the representation of Mr Nojima, a fictional character who represents the real-life experiences of many tsunami victims, Ozeki encourages empathy that extends beyond our immediate circle of family and friends. While watching the tsunami footage, Ruth remarks that 'there was a haphazard quality to the images,

9 Wagō Ryoichi, the Fukushima-based poet explored in Chapter 3, expressed this as a feeling on the part of the victims that 'we can feel the pain, but those who are not in pain would not understand', which creates barriers between victims and non-victims (Wagō & Sano, 2012, pp. 202–204).

as if the photographers didn't quite realize what they were filming ... not understanding the danger they were in ... but always, from the vantage point of the camera, you could see how fast the wave was traveling and how immense it was' (p. 166). Being at a similar 'vantage point' with regards to the disaster, with a knowledge of what might come to hit Nao, Ruth obsesses over her troubles and attempts to retrospectively become involved in her story, even though she knows it is probably too late.

Ozeki further highlights this interconnectedness by tightly weaving together various elements in the plot. Like the gyres that connect the Japanese ocean to Cortes Island in British Columbia, where Ruth and Oliver live, all events in the novel are shown to have a global impact. For example, the September 11 attacks cause Nao's father to become even more depressed and the US bombing of Afghanistan causes Nao's menstrual bleeding to resume. 3.11 is also framed as a global disaster that has global causes and implications. The most obvious one is the tsunami's role in linking Ruth's life to Nao's story over time and space, but the novel also points out facts, such as the coast of Japan moving closer to British Columbia by 13 feet and the length of the day being shortened as a result of the earthquake and the radiation fallout causing anxiety regarding foods such as oysters and salmon where Ruth lives.¹⁰ Additionally, a Japanese jungle crow, which seems to be a kind of reincarnation of Nao's great-grandmother Jiko, appears in Ruth's dreams and physically finds its way to Cortes Island by riding on the tsunami debris. Nao's *hikikomori* story makes Ruth uneasy as she realises that she and Oliver are a kind of *hikikomori* as well and Nao's father and Oliver make the same 'pu-pu-pu' sound with their lips as they sleep. The universe of the novel can be described as functioning like an interconnected quantum system, as Ruth implies in the appendix on entanglement in quantum mechanics. In quantum mechanics, particles can become 'entangled'—that is, 'coordinate their properties across space and time and behave like a single system' (p. 583). When two particles are entangled, the behaviour of one particle can influence the other in a way that cannot be explained by classical physics (i.e. the influence even happens at such a distance that the particles would have to be travelling faster than the speed of light to have an impact on each other). Within the world of the novel, Ruth, Oliver, Nao and Jiko have all become entangled through Ruth's act of reading

10 There have been real-life examples of tsunami debris, including fishing floats, soccer balls and fuel tanks, arriving on the coasts of North America (Barboza, 2012; Wian, 2012).

Nao's diary. Further, although Ruth is the observer of Nao, creating her story, one could say she is being created by Nao, as Oliver claims, because classical chronological conceptions of time no longer apply in this quantum system. In exploring the theme of interconnectedness through the lens of Zen Buddhism as well as the modern discoveries of quantum mechanics, Ozeki cleverly creates numerous entangled and interconnected layers in her writing, which makes it possible for her to explore Japanese society from various perspectives.

Meditation as a Solution to Suicide

At first glance, the Japan that is portrayed by Ozeki does not appear to be a reliable source of advice on how to *live*—suicide is the most important social issue explored in the novel, both for the plot and because of what it reveals about Japanese society. Many types of suicide are portrayed: Nao's father attempts suicide several times due to his depression and Nao considers suicide as a result of the horrific bullying she is subjected to at school. There is also the mention of the suicide of Socrates, Nick Drake, quantum physicist Hugh Everett's daughter, the Japanese troops and Okinawan civilians in *Tetsu no Ame* (rain of steel; the 1945 Battle of Okinawa), the 9/11 suicide bombers and their victims who opted to jump instead of being burned alive and even the nineteenth-century depiction of the *seppuku namazu*, the Suicide Catfish, committing *seppuku* to atone for the deaths he caused by wiggling and thrashing underground. The issue of suicide is particularly relevant to post-3.11 Japanese society because Ozeki also mentions the post-Fukushima suicide of those displaced by the fallout, as well as the Certain Death Squad (aka Fukushima 50) that remained at the nuclear power plants to prevent a full meltdown (arguably a form of unrealised voluntary death).

Further, the readers' perception of a high rate of suicide in the country is further strengthened by the figure of Nao's father, who internalises foreign stereotypes about Japan as the land of *harakiri* and *kamikaze*. As he puts it in his stilted English, 'Sometimes I think American people cannot ever understand why a Japanese would like to make a suicide. American people have a strong sense of their own importance. They believe in individual self and also they have their God to tell them suicide is wrong' (p. 133). This is contrasted with Japanese Zen Buddhism, which does not explicitly reject the idea of suicide, unlike Christianity. To overcome his Japanese urges, Nao's father attempts to read Western philosophy to find meaning in his

life and even emails an old friend psychology professor Dr Leistiko, to ask him to teach him ‘a simple American way to love my life’ (p. 133). In his email, Nao’s father describes that the Japanese have ‘appreciated suicide’ for ‘many thousands of years’ (p. 129), using it as a way to (ironically) truly experience life, ‘at least just for a moment’ (p. 130). This echoes the stereotypical idea in foreign *Nihonjinron* that suicide is socially accepted in Japan and that ‘the Japanese respect for [suicide] allows it to be an honorable and purposeful act’ (Benedict, 1946, p. 166).

One of the manifestations of this honourable suicide in modern Japanese society is the Japanese middle-aged workers who lose their jobs due to downsizing and attempt to hide this from their family by spending their days in a park, until they become ‘scared and feel ashamed like gomi’ (p. 131)¹¹ and commit suicide, as Nao’s father explains. Suicide is also a problem in the modern Japanese schooling system that Nao finds herself in when she returns from the US. According to Nao, Japanese high school exams ‘decide your whole future and the rest of your life and even your afterlife’ (p. 190), because they determine your choice of university, employment prospects, income, potential partners, the life of your children and whether you receive a proper funeral, allowing you to enter the Pure Land and to not have to come back as a vengeful ghost. It is this kind of singular thought that does not allow for alternatives, which leads to suicide—just like a *rōnin* no longer had a *raison d’être* without his master, the existence of a modern-day *rōnin* (a student who fails their entrance exams and is preparing for the next session) hinges on his success in an examination. Without success, the *rōnin* turns into a nobody in the eyes of Japanese society, similar to Nao’s father, who turns into a *hikikomori* after attempting to commit suicide by throwing himself in front of a train. Nao notices that in this state, he looks eerily similar to what she imagines ghosts of workers who commit suicide look like. Even while still alive, Nao’s father is somewhere in between the realms of life and death. Nao ‘feels like a ghost’ (p. 186) after her ostracism at school and after she discovers that no one (even her best friend from Sunnyvale, Kayla) was responding to or viewing her emails and blog posts. Japanese society is shown to be a breeding ground for this kind of half-dead, half-alive outcast class, due to the lack of alternatives when one’s life does not go exactly to plan.

11 *Gomi* means ‘rubbish’ in Japanese.

This idea that Japanese society does not provide alternatives is an oft-repeated one in foreign *Nihonjinron*: in *Japan as Number One*, Ezra Vogel (1979) claimed that the Japanese have a tendency to condemn misfits, causing high suicide rates among those who do not ‘enter a place of work that he or his family consider[s] desirable’ and that ‘suicide rates are high among Japanese youth and those who are discouraged by not making the proper organization may be more depressed than their American counterparts, who will have a variety of later options open to them’ (p. 240). In these earlier pages of the novel, Nao and her father reinforce the stereotypical foreign portrayal of the Japanese as people who derive their meaning of life or happiness from a stable career. In this view, residents of the disaster-hit areas who still have not been able to return to their previous occupations would naturally be unhappy, as proven by the example of post-Fukushima suicides. Such a view carries the risk of masking the alarming nature of the high incidence of suicides following a disaster such as 3.11, which throws the lives of many off course.¹² Nao’s story is centred around Nao and her father’s journey towards rejecting this internalised *Nihonjinron* idea of suicide and finding their own Japanese way to affirm life.

In the end, Ozeki demonstrates that the Japanese way of thinking points to life and that it may even be more helpful than its Western counterparts in helping people to avoid suicide. Nao’s great uncle Haruki (referred to as ‘Number One’ in the novel because Nao’s father is also called Haruki), who was a philosophy student at Tokyo University before getting drafted to the war, is the primary voice Ozeki uses for the comparison between Zen Buddhism and Western philosophy. Haruki chooses to seek meaning in the remaining few moments of his life as a *kamikaze* pilot through his knowledge of Zen Buddhism, rather than Heidegger’s philosophy, which he presumably studied at university. Haruki puts Zen master Dōgen’s philosophy on an equal footing with those of Western philosophers. He points out that, ‘to philosophize is to learn to die’ (p. 464), even if there is a difference between East and West in ‘the notion of what it meant “to philosophize”’ (p. 464). Zen prevents Haruki from becoming despondent thinking about his imminent death and Dōgen’s idea that ‘both life and death manifest in every moment of existence’ (p. 466)

12 There were 117 suicides officially reported as ‘3.11-related’ in the Fukushima, Miyagi and Iwate prefectures from 2011 to 2013. However, this figure is likely to be understated as it only includes suicides that could be formally attributed to the disaster (e.g. suicides that took place in evacuation shelters and temporary housing) (Cabinet Office, 2013).

encourages him to live his last moments carefully. Haruki decides to use his last moment to turn his plane off course and to ‘end [his] life in watery disgrace’ (p. 466), with this knowledge that a single moment can have an impact on the fate of so many.

Although Heidegger and Dōgen both emphasise that a constant engagement with one’s death is necessary to live authentically, Haruki compares the thoughts of Heidegger to ‘labyrinthine Teutonic chambers’, while representing Dōgen’s thoughts as ‘quiet, empty rooms’ in which he finds comfort in the face of death—as Haruki puts it, ‘in between the words, Dōgen knew the silences’.¹³ Haruki finds ‘greater satisfaction in Zen and my own Japanese traditions’ (p. 467), which encourage understanding through the bodily experience of *zazen* (seated meditation), rather than words and analysis. In this way, Zen can offer a more direct affirmation of life—*thinking* and understanding in one’s mind that one must live authentically is different to *feeling* in one’s body that one must live authentically. Therefore, despite what the other Haruki in the novel—Nao’s father—initially believes, Zen Buddhism is shown to be a more effective method to find meaning in life than text-based Western thought.

Nao’s father also eventually finds meaning in his life through Zen Buddhism, after some exploration of Western philosophy. After turning into a *hikikomori*, Nao’s father turns to the ‘Great Minds of Western Philosophy’, a book series that Nao’s mother receives for free from her workplace, as it was not selling well (perhaps an indication that Western philosophy does not suit Japanese tastes). When he finds a philosopher that he does not agree with, he takes their pages out of the books and folds origami insects with them—philosophers that get rejected include Hobbes and Nietzsche. This is particularly interesting because these two philosophers represent differing views on suicide. Hobbes, from his perspective of social contract theory, believed that the desire to commit suicide was irrational (and insane) and, therefore, based on reason, ‘a man is forbidden to do that which is destructive of his life, or taketh away the means of preserving the same and to omit that by which he thinketh it may best be preserved’ (Hobbes, 1651, p. 64). Although there is no consensus on what Nietzsche’s thoughts were on suicide, he never rejected

13 Haruki or Ozeki is not the first to compare Heidegger’s philosophy to Zen Buddhism. Reinhard May (1996) explored Daoist and Zen Buddhist influences on Heidegger’s work (especially his concept of ‘nothing’) and Steven Heine (1985) pointed out similarities in the conception of time in Heidegger and Dōgen’s works (Dōgen’s ‘impermanence’ being similar to Heidegger’s ‘finitude’).

the act, claiming that ‘the thought of suicide is a great consolation: by means of it one gets successfully through many a bad night’ (Nietzsche, 1909–1913, no. 157). Nao’s father rejects both extremes in the Western thought on suicide—outright prohibition, or moral acceptance. The one philosopher that seems to impress him is Heidegger, who would cause him to read passages aloud and interrupt Nao’s homework. However, even Heidegger is not entirely helpful, as shown when an even more depressed Nao’s father begins to fold a Japanese rhinoceros beetle out of his page. The words of another Western philosopher, Socrates, are used to justify his second suicide attempt: ‘I should only make myself ridiculous in my own eyes if I clung to life and hugged it when it has no more to offer’ (p. 407). Although Heidegger helps him, he finds the ultimate answer in the Zen Buddhism of his grandmother, Jiko. After all the things he tries, Jiko’s final words of ‘to live, for the time being’ is the only thing that convinces him that *ikiru shika nai* (we don’t have a choice but to live), for the time being (as in now, temporarily, but also in the sense that humans are ‘time beings’, with a time limit) (p. 518). Even though many Western philosophers condemn suicide, the simplicity of Zen Buddhist teaching is what convinces him in the end that life is worth living.

Zen Buddhism also helps Nao live and face her problems in several ways. First, Jiko teaches her to be always respectful and polite to others, no matter how they treat her. There is an especially illustrative and humorous scene when Jiko and Nao go to a Family Mart to buy some rice balls and chocolates for a picnic and they encounter some *yanki* (delinquent) school girls. Jiko calmly returns their nasty words with a bow, which earns her respect and causes them to return the bow. This respect also extends to objects (which are also beings, according to Zen), as shown by the careful re-using of ‘every rubber band or twist-tie, every piece of string or paper or scrap of fabric’ (p. 295) at Jiko’s temple. Although Nao disagrees with Jiko that ‘our original nature is to be kind and good’ (p. 262) and remarks that ‘many of the Great Minds of Western Philosophy back me up on this’ (p. 262), spending time with her great-grandmother gives her the ability to forgive. Second, Jiko helps Nao to find calm and peace within herself through *zazen*, which to her is like ‘a home that you can’t ever lose’ (p. 264). This is particularly significant for Nao, who ‘never had a home except for Sunnyvale, which [she] lost’ (p. 264). After moving back to Japan, Nao feels ‘like a foreigner living in that stupid Tokyo apartment with these strange people who said they were [her] parents but [she] barely even knew anymore’ (p. 199). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Zen

Buddhist ideas on time and impermanence are what ultimately stop Nao from ending her life. The Buddhist teaching of impermanence, as Ozeki shows, does not point to a nihilistic view of human existence; instead, it teaches Nao to cherish life precisely because it is fleeting. As Nao says when she is reflecting on her decision to end her life, ‘There’s nothing like realizing that you don’t have much time left to stimulate your appreciation for the moments of your life’ (p. 476). Zen Buddhism allows Nao, who grows up surrounded by adult lies and cover-ups, to eliminate her fears for life by allowing her to think about death and face it squarely for the first time.

At first, Nao believes that there are certain suicides that are more controlled and dignified (Haruki) than others (Nao’s father)—as Nao points out when she confronts her father, Haruki’s suicide was ‘totally different’, because ‘he wasn’t a coward’ and ‘he flew his plane into the enemy’s battleship to protect his homeland’ (p. 377). However, as Nao later finds out from reading Haruki’s secret French diary, Haruki had flown his plane deliberately into the sea instead of the battleship to avoid causing any casualties. Even in the case of a forced suicide like Haruki’s, we can still be in control of our own death—every moment of our existence counts, up to our last one because each moment contains numerous possibilities. Dōgen divided the snap of a finger into 65 moments to remind himself of this and, as Haruki puts it, ‘in even a fraction of a second, we have the opportunity to choose and to turn the course of our action either towards the attainment of truth or away from it’ (p. 466). With this realisation, Nao learns to cope with life by living each moment to the full, while being fully aware of the limited time we have, as time beings. Through the journeys of the main characters, Ozeki shows that despite Nao’s father’s belief that suicide is a Japanese phenomenon, the Japanese tradition of Zen Buddhism points to life.

Ikigai

Another way of finding happiness in life that is explored in the novel is to become a superhero with one’s own superpower (or ‘SUPAHIRO-!’ and ‘SUPAPAWA-!’ as Jiko pronounces them)—the terms are first mentioned by Jiko after Nao tells her about her bullying at school and Jiko decides to give Nao instructions on how to sit *zazen*. Jiko’s Zen superpower is a kind of enlightened state, which gives people the strength to live their life by becoming superheroes. Interestingly, Heidegger also uses the term

hero, a concept that Haruki mentions in his diary. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger (1996) refers to man's possibility of choosing one's 'hero' (p. 385)—a great example of a human being—in the struggle to live authentically. Haruki Number One becomes Nao's new hero when she finds out about him through Jiko and this also helps her to live her life. However, what she does not realise yet at this stage is that her own father is also 'a total superhero' (p. 555) who was fired from his job for standing up for his beliefs—refusing to apply his fun and addictive computer game interface to weapons technology, which would facilitate soldiers to carry out destructive bombing missions. It is through the examples of these two Harukis as well as Jiko that Nao learns what it is to live authentically.

According to both Zen Buddhism and Heidegger, anyone has the potential to be a (super)hero and have superpowers. Your superpower is what you do best, your *raison d'être* or *ikigai*, which you must focus on, accompanied by the knowledge that life is fleeting. Once Nao's father decides to live, with the help of Zen Buddhism, he gets his superpower of programming back and delves into the world of quantum computing.¹⁴ Getting inspiration from Nao's bullying, Nao's father devotes his time to developing an online encryption and security system called 'Mu-Mu Vital Hygienics', which involves using a web crawler to sanitise personal information on the internet. The crawler uses two methods, one mechanical and the other a much more complicated method involving the use of quantum computing to 'collaborate between worlds and switch possible pasts' (p. 549). As for Nao, she finds her *ikigai* in the 'superpower' of writing—on the last pages of her diary, she announces that she will write the story of Jiko's life next and decides that 'at least until I finish writing her story, I absolutely don't want to die' (p. 558).

Through the concept of radical interconnectedness as well as quantum entanglement, Ozeki asserts Ruth's right to care about Nao and other potential 3.11 victims and makes the case for the global relevance and importance of the Japanese disaster. Ozeki suggests that the solution to Japanese problems such as suicide have been contained in the Japanese tradition of Zen Buddhism and that post-3.11 Japanese society needs to reclaim its traditional thinking to overcome these problems of modernity. Ozeki's critique of Japanese society is not directed towards its social problems per se, but rather towards the fact that the Japanese have

14 Quantum computers are in development at the time of writing and may soon become a reality, as Galchen (2011) explains in her *New Yorker* article (which Ozeki consulted for her book).

internalised foreign stereotypes about themselves and have ignored their own traditions. As a transnational author, Ozeki provides a view from the outside on what traditions make Japan unique.

Ozeki's focus on Zen Buddhism is particularly interesting in light of the fact that authors and commentators in Japan focused more on Shintō and animistic beliefs, such as the idea of earthquakes as divine punishment, as a spiritual framework for post-3.11 Japan (e.g. Wagō and Kawakami). Ozeki, an ordained Zen Buddhist priest who lives outside of Japan and who has consequently witnessed the popularity of Zen philosophy in the West in recent years, suggests that Zen Buddhism rather than Shintō, is the philosophy that has the power to remain relevant in the post-3.11 world. Japanese Zen philosophy is shown to be a particularly helpful tool for maintaining a positive attitude towards life and accepting changes to one's life plans. Although all the thought systems explored in the novel—Zen Buddhism, Heidegger and quantum mechanics—embrace multiplicity and teach us to cherish our present in the face of impermanence, Ozeki concludes that *zazen* and writing are especially effective ways to experience this. *A Tale for the Time Being* is Ozeki's expression of her continued belief in the power of fiction as well as Zen Buddhism in the post-3.11 world.

While *otaku* scholars such as Morikawa Kaichirō and Takekuma Kentarō (see Chapter 1) predicted the downfall of Japan's cool culture following 3.11, *Shin Godzilla* and *A Tale for the Time Being* affirm Japan's continuing cultural and technological relevance to the world, albeit in different ways. These works both demonstrate that, with some searching, Japanese people can find the solutions to their post-3.11 problems within their own culture, whether it is the *otaku* mindset, *ikigai* or Zen Buddhism.

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