

Japan Must Not Repeat its Foolishness: Interview with Dr. Kiyoshi Kurokawa

If Japan does not begin to change this time, it will have no future

It has been four months since the Diet's Fukushima Nuclear Accident Independent Investigation Commission (NAIIC) concluded that the accident was man-made in its final report. The former chairman of the commission, Dr. Kiyoshi Kurokawa, professor at the National Institute of Graduate Studies, is still busy representing NAIIC. He has been traveling all over Japan to give lectures and even abroad to give presentations on the English version of the report.

It will be a problem if the report is ignored and forgotten. Whether the report is used effectively or is shot down will be decided by politics. Politicians may only be thinking about their own positions, but it is the Japanese people who choose them. For this reason, it is important for the Japanese public to understand the content of the report. It is a problem that directly affects Japan's future, so I have been speaking about this issue whenever I get the chance.

The commission members are all quite outspoken experts and were asked to write based on facts in the report and keep their opinions to themselves. However, commission members each wrote a message, in which they were able to express their views. The messages touched on themes such as social theories about Japan, the corruption of the elite who lacked preparedness, and the fundamental problems with the social structure that allowed the negligence of safety. There has been some criticism, but one can see that the messages express the deep feelings of each commission member.

In my message, I wrote about Kan-ichi Asakawa, who lived one hundred years ago. He is originally from Nihonmatsu in Fukushima and attended Tokyo Senmon Gakko, the predecessor of Waseda University. He moved to the United States and eventually became a professor at Yale University, the first Japanese to become a professor at a university abroad. To the United States public, he defended Japan's position in the Japan-Russo War, and even played a role in mediating the peace treaty. However, regarding the Manchurian Incident by Japan after the victory of Japan-Russo War, he pointed out that in this case Japan was wrong and further warned that if Japan continued to go down that path, it would clash with the U.S. and China and lose in the end.

%cited Prof Asakawa because if Japan does not change, it will surely end up in a terrible state in the future. Japan ignored Asakawa's warning and plunged into war and lost. My message is that Japan must learn and not repeat this foolishness after the Fukushima nuclear accident. Not only the politicians, bureaucrats, and people in the industry, but each individual Japanese citizen must be aware of the fact that if Japan does not change, there will be no future for this country.+

Reject the mindset that the current social structure is how things should be

When he was a child, Dr. Kurokawa almost died from tuberculosis. Perhaps this influenced his way of thinking, in that he %developed a critical or rebellious spirit.+Balance is important and he makes it a point to always maintain some distance from the mainstream majority. It is with this rebellious spirit that he sharply criticizes the ruling elite class, which is comprised of those with the highest test scores in the system, and expresses concern for the dominated society.

%studied abroad in the U.S. in my early thirties and stayed after, which allowed me to have many experiences in those years. As I observed Japanese people during my stay in the U.S., I noticed that they were becoming arrogant as Japan increased its economic might. They did not integrate into American society and cared too much about titles and maintaining hierarchical relations. Even though Japanese are Asian, they were not friendly to other Asians. I thought there must be something wrong with Japan.+

%Today, whatever segment of Japanese society you look at, there exists a pyramid-shaped hierarchical structure. If I ask where the very top of the pyramid is, most people reply, Kasumigaseki, thus meaning the bureaucratic ministries. When I ask what is the top of the pyramid in the bureaucracy, they answer that it is the Ministry of Finance, and furthermore that the administrative vice-minister is the top there. The next question is how to get there. The answer is to attend the University of Tokyo Faculty of Law. It is the same with working for major corporations, once you get in, the system does not change and you just go up the hierarchical ladder and follow the seniority system.+

%Such a system and way of thinking is not prevalent in other countries. However, few in Japan think critically about this. The elite in the bureaucracy

and the major corporations prioritize protecting their own positions. Even when there is collusion and problems arise, they are left to be dealt with in the future. There is no sense of being ready for the possibility that something might happen. This is the single track elite problem, which I referred to in the report. They cannot change even when they must change. This can be seen in the twenty lost years after the economic bubble burst and it is the deeper reason for being unable to prevent the accident.

There is a mindset among Japanese people to consider this as the way things should be. If they are having a conversation but cannot tell where they stand hierarchically, the conversation does not move smoothly and they start to feel afraid. The tendency to think that this hierarchy is natural can also be seen in the language. The language and culture is one thing, but this mindset lies deep within the fundamentals of the negligence of safety. It is necessary to reconsider this.

To the youth- experience living abroad and observe Japan from the outside

Even if we tell the elite to change after this nuclear accident, we don't know if it will happen. An incredible amount of energy is necessary to change an organization and its way of thinking. The only people we can count on to change things by themselves may be young people.

I have repeatedly said that we must foster the nail that sticks out. If you do not choose a life of high risk and high return, you cannot change society. In Japan, there are so few people who choose that. But if just one or two percent of the population are like that, they will have the strength to change society. Nowadays, as we are an internet society, I believe that just a few people can spread social change.

In order to develop such individuals, I have been trying to encourage young people by recommending that they take time off from school. If they have independence from a young age and experience living abroad, they will develop a good form of patriotism and will better understand Japan's problems. People in Japan often describe something as being a global idea. However, it is only a global idea from the Japanese perspective. Thus, it does not indicate an understanding of how Japan is viewed by the world. If young people observe

Japan from the outside with high awareness, they may be a powerful force in propelling Japan out of its narrow perspective and changing society.+

To change society, difference is necessary. In many western societies, there is a culture of encouraging people who are filled with curiosity. There are many people who do not choose a stable way of living after graduating from prestigious universities, but instead choose a high risk way of living, such as going to Africa. Japan must also foster people who will explore rather than aim for the top of the hierarchical structure after graduating from prestigious universities. I encourage such people. In order to change Japanese society and get out of this mindset, we must foster difference, disagreement and dissonance.+(Senior editor Masami Shimizu)