

Was the Fukushima Nuclear Power Plant Accident “Made in Japan”?

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The English version of the official report released by the [Fukushima Nuclear Accident Independent Investigation Commission \(NAIIC\)](#) of the [National Diet of Japan](#) contains a preface message by the chairman with the following passage.

What must be admitted - very painfully - is that **this was a disaster “Made in Japan.”** Its fundamental causes are to be found in the ingrained conventions of Japanese culture: our reflexive obedience; our reluctance to question authority; our devotion to ‘sticking with the program’; our groupism; and our insularity.

At a press conference attended by Chairman Kurokawa at the Foreign Correspondents’ Club of Japan, however, differences between the English and Japanese versions of the preface in the report became an issue. No words for “Made in Japan” are found in the Japanese version, whose equivalent passage translates into English as follows:

Why did such an accident, which should have been foreseeable, occur? Its fundamental causes can be traced back to the period of Japan’s high economic growth. As politicians, government officials, and businessmen united under common goals set forth under national policy, a complex fabric of “regulatory capture” was woven together.

Founded on nearly 50 years of governance by the same political party, this fabric provided a distinctive structure and organization throughout government and business, such as hiring fresh graduates in fixed annual sets, lockstep age seniority, and lifetime employment. In addition, the mindset or assumption held by the Japanese people considered all of these characteristics to be the norm. Alongside economic growth, Japanese self-confidence shifted over time to overconfidence and conceit.

[Regulatory capture](#) is a term from economics whose Japanese equivalent was originally derived from the English. Clearly, it is not a phenomenon “made in Japan.” A search for the term “capture” (or “captive” as applicable in Japanese) across the entire text of the full report identified Section 5.2, “Regulatory Agency Made Captive of TEPCO and FEPCO,” but nothing in this section described the lobbying by the businesses to be grounds for labeling the circumstances as “made in Japan.” In fact, lobbying in the U.S. is much more intense, where the power companies tend to pepper the NRC with lawsuits.

In hindsight, TEPCO’s failure to implement tsunami countermeasures and lack of foresight regarding a total loss of power clearly constituted gross negligence, and the government certainly became a victim of regulatory capture. If their causes were attributed to the peculiarity of the Japanese people, however, other nuclear power plants around the world would be deemed safe. Cultural theory misses the mark as a landing point for the lessons learned from this accident. We have a globally common issue here, and have no choice but “To reflect the latest scientific knowledge in regulations,” as stated in the report.

The larger issue is where “capture” (or “captive”) appears in Section 5.2.3 “Debate over Treatment of the Latest Knowledge.” Here the report characterizes NISA as being captive to FEPCO’s lobbying activities over the adoption of ICRP recommendations in the regulations:

Electric utilities were urging for the relaxation of radiation protection [regulations] prior to the accident. Consequently, they attempted to steer, respectively, research on the health effects of radiation toward conclusions of fewer health hazards, and views on radiation protection by experts inside and outside Japan toward conclusions supporting relaxation

A Japanese radiation researcher reading this would be incensed. No researcher, to my knowledge, has presented scientifically flawed views as a consequence of "steering" by government. Globally, scientists who concur that the ICRP recommendations are excessive regulations are in the majority, at least within the radiation biology field. This fact is clear, even from the academic papers collected internationally by [GEPR](#).

The report provides the premise that the current radiation standards are more relaxed than what it should be, but the Commission has not scientifically verified this. Actually, the government issued an evacuation notice for communities as low as 1 mSv/year by excessively strict application of the ICRP recommendations. As a result, over 150,000 people affected by the accident remain unable to return to their homes 17 months later. The biggest suffering from the Fukushima nuclear accident took the form of excessive evacuation, which has become a secondary disaster.

Reports issued by the United Nations and Russian Government about the Chernobyl accident have explained that [the secondary disasters have been greater than the health hazards from radiation](#). The Japanese Government's report understandably cannot criticize the current standards, but the Fukushima NAIIC of the National Diet of Japan, which has been guaranteed autonomy, has leaned on the convention that radioactivity is infinitely dangerous, and denounced the associated parties with the colloquial "Nuclear Village" adage. This type of writing is almost at the same level as the mass media.

When it comes to the environment or health, Shichihei Yamamoto criticized the common Japanese fault of a tendency to promote excessive regulations that met with the social climate, rather than to examine the matter scientifically. In this context, the non-scientific report released by the Fukushima NAIIC of the National Diet of Japan is definitely "Made in Japan."

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