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Citation for final published version:

Hood, Christopher P. 2022. Book Review. Japan Forum 10.1080/09555803.2022.2140181

Publishers page: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09555803.2022.2140181>

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Book Review

Christopher P. Hood

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Book Review

Daniel P. Aldrich, *Black Wave: How Networks and Governance Shaped Japan's 3/11 Disasters*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2019, 270 pp.

For many of us, we can remember exactly where we were on 11 March 2011. Whether we were in Japan or elsewhere, within minutes of the mega earthquake striking, images of what was occurring were being broadcast globally. We watched, shocked, unable to find the right words as the tsunami rolled into and over the coastline. Over the ensuing hours, we tried to learn more about what had happened, in general terms, but also, often, at a micro level to those we knew. As the day went on, so the initial disaster seemed to have peaked, and attention could largely start turning to thinking about survival and recovery. But, of course, the disaster was not over. The third element was still building to its explosive contribution to the Great East Japan Earthquake and Disaster the following day in the form of the events at the Fukushima Dai-Ichi Nuclear Power Plant.

In the days, months, and years, many of us grappled to understand what had really happened during the days, weeks, and longer of the disaster. For the disaster did not even end on 12 March. Indeed, it is questionable whether it has ended even

now in 2022. While disaster studies had remained an ominously under-studied area of Japanese studies prior to 2011, in the years that followed, many academic studies have been published. Without doubt, as someone who had been working on disasters prior to the events of 2011, Aldrich's expertise and contribution to this body of literature is a useful addition in the form of this book. But this conclusion comes with caveats.

Returning to the first paragraph of this review, as noted, many of us remember the events of 2011. But, for more and more students, amongst others, the memories are not so clear and there may be little or knowledge of the events. Outside Japanese Studies, the problem may be even greater. In that respect, Aldrich's study will be extremely useful. However, I wonder whether they will even find the study. The main title of the book is '*Black Wave*', a term which resonates so much with us who watched the images of the tsunami as it poured over walls, roads, and fields. Without that knowledge, however, it sounds more like a cultural counterpart to the 'Korean Wave'. While the subtitle helps, beyond the Japanese Studies community, '3/11' is not well-known, so I fear that it may not reach those who would benefit from reading it. Further, the image of a crane and

47 construction on a red circle, while sym-
48 bologically connecting Japan's national flag
49 and building, appears to detract from a
50 key aspect of the book; survival and
51 recovery was largely about connections
52 and people rather than construction and
53 reconstruction.

54 One of the biggest problems about
55 studying single events, particularly ones
56 where the issues relating to it are on-
57 going, is that text can become dated. The
58 text for *Black Wave* was completed in
59 October 2018, and, one suspects, the
60 majority of the research some time before
61 that. The book was then published in
62 2019 and I am now reviewing the book in
63 2022. At best, there is already a four gap –
64 four years in relation to an event that was
65 (only) 11 years ago. How much has
66 changed since the work was completed? In
67 many cases, it does not overly matter, as
68 many of the points that Aldrich so suc-
69 cinctly makes are likely to be valid.
70 However, the data on which the conclu-
71 sions are based, if cited in undergraduate
72 essays, would likely be appended with the
73 question about whether more up-to-date
74 data were available. This problem is com-
75 pounded by the fact that often the main
76 text (clarification can usually be found in
77 the references) often refers to things hap-
78 pening 'to date' without specifying what
79 date that is. There are even cases where
80 data is presented and it is clear that it only
81 deals with the response up to 2013, in
82 other words it was already five years out of
83 date when the manuscript was completed,
84 let alone with what the situation is now.

85 I did find the lack of clarity in the text
86 frustrating at times. It would appear that
87 Aldrich has, seemingly in reflecting upon
88 feedback upon some of his previous work,
89 tried to present the main text in a way that
90 is easy for readers to follow, by moving the
91 bulk of statistical data and such like to
92 appendices, for example, and by not having
93


intrusive references. For that, he should be
commended. However, the frequent refer-
ences to 'one scholar' in sentences without
naming them (again, the name appears in
the reference) was frustrating and, in my
view, an unnecessary and unhelpful way of
presenting the information.

Much of this review may seem critical,
but it would be unfair for readers of this
review to assume that the book is without
merit. It makes a number of really useful
points, splitting the book into chapters
that handle the various actors involved in
the disaster: individual level, municipal
level, prefectural level, national level, and
international level. All of these chapters
have valuable contributions to make in
relation to not only our understanding of
responses to '3/11' but also how civil
society and politics, for example, work in
Japan. In some ways, the book may have
been better without the 'international
level' chapter, or, at least, how it was
handled, as it slipped from the inter-
national responses to '3/11' to looking at
some other international disasters, which,
due to how incomparable they were to '3/
11', felt like an unnecessary step for this
study, and something that deserves a
much more detailed book of its own.

On balance, *Black Wave* is a useful
contribution to the literature on not only
disasters, but also on the nature of polit-
ics and civil society in Japan. Further, it
has some very important insights into
how assumptions about walls to resist
tsunami are not the critical factor in rela-
tion to survival, and, as a consequence,
how the construction industry, through
the recovery process, is part of a process
that is unlikely to deliver what is actually
needed. These points have arguably not
been made as clear in other studies of '3/
11' and so while *Black Wave* is not the
only book people should read on the dis-
aster (and, again, keep in mind its points

reach beyond disaster studies), it is
certainly a key text that should be read.

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/09555803.2022.2140181>



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