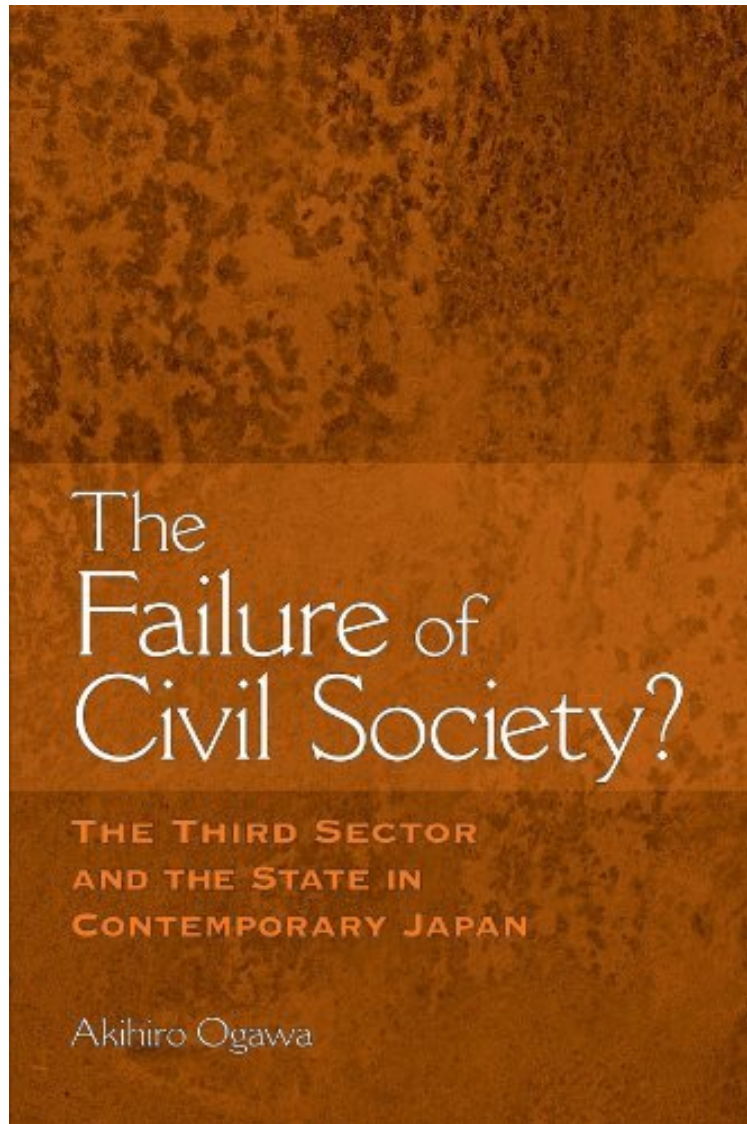


(Ebook free) The Failure of Civil Society?: The Third Sector and the State in Contemporary Japan

## The Failure of Civil Society?: The Third Sector and the State in Contemporary Japan

*Akihiro Ogawa*

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**Akihiro Ogawa : The Failure of Civil Society?: The Third Sector and the State in Contemporary Japan** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Failure of Civil Society?: The Third Sector and the State in Contemporary Japan:

5 of 5 people found the following review helpful. Of wider interest than its title and cover suggestBy A. J. SutterIt's unfortunate that this book is being marketed by a university press, because from its title and blurb you'd think it would be of interest only to academics. I think in fact it can be enjoyed by any foreigner who lives, has lived or hopes to live

in a Japanese city, especially Tokyo. I live in a shitamachi (downtown) neighborhood of central Tokyo roughly just across the Sumida River from the area the author (AO) describes. I've long been baffled by the huge number of community meeting houses, neighborhood association signboards, festivals, events, fliers and other community activity unlike anything I experienced in the US. Chapter 2 of this book is an eye-opening guide to the menagerie of volunteer organizations and their functions within a typical neighborhood. Most of the rest of the book is a fascinating first-person description of what it's like to participate in one of them. These are worlds that exist right in our own neighborhoods, but that even foreigners who are fluent in Japanese rarely try to enter. Although some of AO's comments suggest that the book is a re-purposed Ph.D. thesis in anthropology, for the most part the writing style is more like a popular current events book, thanks to AO's prior career as a professional reporter. (Chapter 1 and part of Chapter 6 are a bit more academic, but don't outweigh the rest of the book.) In addition, AO's research methodology was something called "Action Research," which apparently means that he wasn't constrained to observe other people coolly, but allowed to participate and actually try to do something cooperatively with the people he was observing, for the sake of promoting social change. This also contributes to making his narrative more engaging (and engaged). In its academic context, the book's goal is to provide an ethnography of life in a Japanese non-profit organization (NPO). Japan modified its NPO law in 1998, to make it easier to form such organizations. This book has some useful statistical data that appears current through around 2007. The thesis of the book is that NPOs have been "strategically co-opted by the state" (@180) to become a feature of "neoliberal governmentality" (@175) and "a calculated reorganization of the Japanese public sphere designed to establish a small government in the postwelfare state through the transfer of social services originally delivered by the state to volunteer-driven NPOs" (@174). It isn't clear from this book to what extent this might be true of NPOs in other advanced countries, but it does seem to reflect a change in the tone of Japanese civil society from the more activist 1950s-1970s. This neoliberal trend is well-documented in the case of the NPO at which AO worked, whose goal was to provide "lifelong learning" for community residents. The organization began as a simple citizen's group, many of whose volunteers had been invited to join by the local municipal government (ku, something like a borough of New York City). The ku government also provided all the funding -- and imposed the shift to formal NPO status. None of the volunteers had sought this status, and many left because the focus of the group soon began to be less on providing educational services and more on "how do we act like a proper NPO?" Eventually the government tried to foist building maintenance and other services onto the NPO volunteers' shoulders, for the explicitly-acknowledged sake of cost-cutting. Relying on NPO volunteers enables governments to avoid restrictive labor laws, such as those that limit the working hours of government employees. AO also describes how the Japanese government, at multiple levels, is directly responsible for the formation of many NPOs, which it sees primarily as a tool for helping government. (BTW, political organizations aren't eligible for NPO status in Japan.) The state also inculcates and exploits the idealism of "volunteering" through PR and educational campaigns -- in effect, trying to make volunteering compulsory. The benefit to the state is that it gets to outsource social welfare services without having to pay much for them. Not that NPOs get much in return for their idealism -- I was shocked to learn that only about 0.2% of NPOs can meet the approval requirements for tax exempt status. Nonetheless, my one concern with the book was that AO might be painting Japanese NPOs too broadly as unwitting (though at times resistant) victims of a neoliberal plot. Surely some of Japan's roughly 30,000 NPOs weren't founded at government behest? It would be useful for a future study to consider the extent of the spectrum of NPO founding histories. The book has an excellent bibliography. I hope that the paperback edition will be priced more reasonably, because it's definitely worth your time to read if you have any interest in contemporary urban Japan.

A look at the voluntary sector in Japan, which has emerged strongly only in recent years. The global discourse on civil society is both complicated and enriched in this participant study of Japan's volunteers, known as the third sector. In the wake of the Japanese government's failed response to the 1995 earthquake, volunteers took the lead in providing aid to victims. This recent sea change in Japanese society was quickly followed by the 1998 NPO Law (nonprofit organization law) that encourages third sector activities. Drawing on his fieldwork at one of the new NPOs, Akihiro Ogawa explores in detail the social and historical particularities of Japanese "civil society" or shimin shakai, revisiting how the concept is interpreted and practiced by the volunteers themselves. Civil society, Ogawa argues, can best be understood as an active, dynamic process rather than as a static, abstract model. . . . a welcome addition to the still scant ethnographic literature on Japan's civil sector, providing an in-depth and multi-dimensional look at the ways civil society organizations have been reimagined, mobilized and constrained by the Japanese state and by its citizens . . . This book is especially valuable to the growing number of practitioners in the fields of nonprofit management, voluntary action and social entrepreneurship. . . . Pacific Affairs . . . Ogawa's excellent study is particularly valuable because of its combination of ethnographic grounding and analytical reach . . . His study raises important and uncomfortable questions about Japan's civil society. . . . Japanese Studies . . . Ogawa challenges the notion that the third sector in Japan exists independent of the state . . . [and] offer[s] fascinating insights into the state-civil society relations. . . . Social Science Japan Journal . . . Ogawa writes an interesting, provocative examination of the development of civil

society in contemporary Japan ...; This book will be of interest to students on non-Western civil society, scholars of contemporary Japan and of social entrepreneurship, and research methodologists. CHOICE ...; Ogawa provides a fascinating account of contemporary Japanese civil society at the grass roots. His careful and illuminating ethnography of a recently incorporated nonprofit organization (NPO) reveals important insights into the changing nature of Japanese citizenship and the relationship between the nonprofit sector and the state in contemporary Japan ...; a valuable addition to the growing literature on civil society in Japan. Journal of Japanese Studies ...; Ogawa's book provides a deep insight into contemporary Japan ...; This is an impressive study that is truly multidisciplinary in its approach and analysis. Voluntas ...; Akihiro Ogawa's book is a timely and challenging ethnography of civil society in contemporary Japan. Asian Anthropology ...; Akihiro Ogawa is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Japanese Studies at Stockholm University.

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