ABSTRACT:

Although Japan has been assailed for millennia by earthquakes, typhoons, and floods, contemporary Japanese disaster preparedness draws its lessons largely from the 1995 Kobe earthquake. The government’s lackluster response to that urban catastrophe led to the broad consensus that the state is fundamentally ill-suited to address large-scale catastrophes on its own. It is in the context of this realization that civil disaster preparedness in Japan has taken its current form. How exactly the burden of preparedness should best be divvied up between the state, civil society, and the individual is of central importance in Japanese preparedness discourse. This concern is captured succinctly in the widespread motto "self help, together help, government help."

This paper examines the disproportionate focus on the doer over the deed in Japanese preparedness. If Japan is less concerned with what must be done than with who it is that must do it, what can be said of the ways in which the state, the community, and the individual take shape when observed through the lens of disaster preparedness? Who, I ask, is the ideal ‘self’ under the aspect of disaster preparedness? What is the nature of the ideal ‘community’ in preparedness discourse? And, lastly, what constitutes the ideal government within the purview of preparedness discourse?

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