

Air of Divided Society

By Naofumi KANEKO

Let's think about the "air of the times." I feel that the terror attacks of September 11, 2001, on the United States have radically changed our world view. In Japan, it seems to have been seen as having made more evident the air of society that had been generated by the Aum Shinrikyo cult's poison gas attack in 1995. That is, in a divided society where the dualistic world view of good and evil has prevailed, we faced a nagging question of "where can we find hope for humans to live for?"

Six years ago, in 2005, I undertook a yearlong special news feature project to contemplate what the postwar period meant for Japan as we marked the 60th anniversary milestone since the end of World War II. My objective was to see how Japan's postwar pacifism had metamorphosed itself during the country's rapid economic growth between the 1960s and 1970s, and how it had led to today's society in which economic inequality has firmly entrenched itself. In this analysis, 1995, the year of the Great Hanshin Earthquake and the gas attack, was viewed as a major turning point.

The death toll of the quake in January 1995 exceeded 6,000 people. Makoto Oda, a novelist and one of the standard-bearers of Japan's postwar pacifism, was among those affected by the quake in Nishinomiya City, Hyogo Prefecture. In 2005, he recalled that "all that the people had built through postwar prosperity went up in flames." Oda superimposed that image onto the flames of massive air raids on Osaka he had experienced just before the end of the war. It was probably the moment when "fissure" became visible in the peace and prosperity of postwar Japan. The series of sarin gas attacks on the Tokyo subway system by the Aum cult struck three months after the quake. Aum followers sprayed the lethal chemical sarin gas on Tokyo subway trains, killing 13 passengers.

According to film director Tatsuya Mori, a vague sense of insecurity and fear toward unknown beings has spread throughout Japanese society since this crime, leading to excessive concern about safety to an almost paranoid extent. Unlike the sense of peace and democracy that is based on trust in the good will of people, the air of society has shifted to something that sniffs out evil intentions of unknown beings and seeks to drive them out.

In his recent novel "1Q84," Haruki Murakami depicts the all-engulfing fissure between good and evil by placing a religious cult at the core of the story. Murakami is also said to have changed the tone of the world he creates because of the killer quake and the cult's crime in 1995. In his remarks at an award ceremony of the Jerusalem Prize in 2009, Murakami described the modern world as a conflict between "a high, solid wall and an egg that breaks against it" and declared he "will always stand on the side of the egg." It was the declaration of his resolve on how he would face the world after the Aum incident and 9/11.

Then, what would be the air of 2011? The bond and trust among people have been lost, and society remains divided.

Photo: Kyodo News



Officials of a child consultation center in Odawara, Shizuoka Pref., display school bags donated by an anonymous contributor likening himself to the hero of the animated film "Tiger Mask."

This is also called a "bondless society." Under these circumstances, the recent *Tiger Mask* phenomenon has attracted attention as symbolizing the spread of good will which has long been forgotten. *Tiger Mask* is the hero of an animated film which was a hit in the 1960s and 1970s. The hero of the story was brought up in an orphanage and, although he became a professional wrestler playing the role of a bad guy, he secretly supports children in the same situation as he. Anonymous donations to children's nursing homes by people calling themselves *Tiger Mask* have triggered a wave of similar moves since late last year, spreading throughout the country in a matter of days. Then, what sort of mood of the times drives people to these acts of endowment? Can we say with certainty that it is evidence of a shift in the air of society toward recovering trust in the good will of people?

The majority of media comments is positive toward the spread of good will. Analysts say middle-aged and older people, who remember the air of the Showa era (1926-1989) symbolized by *Tiger Mask* and who are concerned about the spreading air of a bondless society, have been driven to anonymous good deeds. However, photographer Shinya Fujiwara called these donations "acts of substitution or trade-off" motivated by loneliness, in which people who have none to show their affection for satisfy their sense of presence by attracting attention from others. Namely, it is not that trust in this divided society is being restored but that inexpressible frustration over the societal division is expressed in the disguise of an *anime* hero in the Showa era, when people were still able to feel social bonds, and drove them to anonymous acts of charity.

In a sense, this view does a good job of explaining the dreary state of our modern society that is behind the donation move. I would like to keep watching what sort of tone the air of the times produced by modern society will assume this year.

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Naofumi Kaneko is chief editor, Cultural News Section, Kyodo News.