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By Ide Kazuko

Masses of Japanese living in exile, with some even turning to indiscriminate acts of terrorism, is an unimaginable situation--unless Japan sank deep into the ocean 25 years ago, forcing the entire population to scatter across the globe to survive. With no native soil to stand on, all Japanese have become refugees.

That spine-chilling scenario unfolds in the recently published "Nihon Chinbotsu Dainibu" (Japan Sinks, Part II, Shogakukan, 1,890 yen), by Komatsu Sakyo, Japan's leading science fiction writer, and writer Tani Koshu. The book is a sequel to Komatsu's 1973 "Nihon Chinbotsu," whose two volumes sold nearly 4 million copies.

"Nihon Chinbotsu" became a best seller against the backdrop of the 1973 oil crisis, which caused economic confusion and social anxiety. A series of volcanic eruptions and earthquakes that hit Japan that year also spurred people to pick the book up. A film version made soon after publication became a box-office hit, while an abridged English translation of the novel was published in the United States a few years later. In the postscript to "Nihon Chinbotsu Dainibu," Komatsu writes that in 1964 he began "Nihon Chinbotsu" as a wake-up call to Japanese caught up in the euphoria of the nation's rapid growth who seemed to have forgotten the devastation of World War II. Although he intended to depict the wandering Japanese from the start, a deadline imposed by the publisher prompted him to end the novel with the sinking of Japan.

The original novel opens with the overnight sinking of a small island south of Tokyo. A geophysicist and a pilot of a deep submergence vehicle investigate and detect abnormal crustal movement on the bottom of the Pacific. Soon severe earthquakes and volcanic eruptions begin hitting the whole nation. Heeding of the geophysicist's warning that Japan will sink in a few years, the government secretly starts negotiating with other nations to accept Japanese as immigrants. An exodus from the writhing country is carried out at top speed. An eruption of Mount Fuji devastates Tokyo, and finally the "dragon" at the eastern edge of the Eurasian continent is dragged into the Japan Trench.

After a 33-year wait, the plight of the Japanese came to light this year. This time Komatsu, now 75, got together with younger science-fiction writers to carry out research and weave a plot, entrusting the actual writing to Tani. Although the sequel has a less gripping plot than the original, and a more straightforward rendering of unfolding events, the fortunes of the Japanese are inspiring and give a new perspective on life.

After the disaster, Japan's population has shrunk from 120 million to 80 million. Japanese ministries, based in cities around the world, guide their countrymen, now settled in remote areas in Papua New Guinea, the Amazon basin, Kazakhstan and elsewhere. In some places, Japanese settlers have attained a higher standard of living than local people through hard work or shrewdness, while elsewhere their settlements are blamed for causing environmental destruction.

Although many Japanese have managed to build stable communities, friction with locals in some areas has turned some Japanese into displaced people or even insurgents. Hoping to change this situation and to reaffirm the Japanese identity by reorganizing the dispersed people, the government launches two grand projects: an "Earth simulator," which can reproduce and predict the changing global environment, and "megafloats," massive man-made islands that can house a million people each, to be built in the area where Japan once sat.

Then the simulator predicts a dark future: A glacial period will soon arrive and agriculture in the Northern Hemisphere will be devastated. If nothing is done, one billion people will starve to death within 30 years. China and the United States try to meddle in the Earth simulator and megafloat projects and benefit from them.

Opinion within the Japanese government is divided, with the prime minister insisting that a strong sense of nationalism is needed to protect the Japanese from imminent upheaval and proposing to use the simulator and megafloats for their benefit. Meanwhile, the foreign minister stresses that the Japanese should lay aside nationalism and pursue cosmopolitanism, while retaining the long-standing mode of life that has made the Japanese Japanese.

In the end, the foreign minister's opinion prevails and he becomes prime minister. He says that what the Japanese have gone through will be useful as nations reorganize to set aside land for one billion refugees.

The closing part of the novel is set several centuries later. A descendant of one of the main characters looks down from an interstellar spaceship leaving Earth and sees the Northern Hemisphere covered with ice, low-latitude areas that are heavily developed and countless megafloats built on the equator.

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See an earlier review of the 2006 film sequel of the original Chinbotsu novel.