Japan’s Real Killers
by Steve McCarty


The fallen statue of the great Buddhist saint Kobo Daishi Kukai was so lifelike, with his hand pleading heavenward, and his round pilgrimage hat beyond the bush clover. On a lonely mountaintop in Kyoto, above a crowded World Heritage temple, the sunlight flickered through the trees in the wind. Sympathizing with the mendicant pilgrim, or identifying with his plight, I reached out to meet his outstretched hand, and his eyes seemed to move.

Lee Birnbaum, from a New York family I have been close to since university days in Boston, messaged me that his friend had been mugged and murdered in Tokyo. Wait, what? His friend Numair Choudhury was a young Muslim PhD college teacher from Bangladesh. The family was politically prominent and suspected foul play, asking me to investigate possible police corruption, since they could not get any information at first. Cameras should have captured a mugging at a railway station in Tokyo, they believed. It was escalating into an international incident that would be heightened by confronting Japanese authorities.

The family was on the way to Tokyo, and Lee asked me to get details and contact the police. A Web search in Japanese turned up nothing, whereas such a rare incident would be a sensational front-page story. Fast forward a bit and Lee sent a correction that the mugging occurred near a railway station in Kyoto, not Tokyo. Numair was found without his wallet, drowned in a river.
When the Kyoto Higashiyama police determined that it was an accidental drowning, the family still could not believe it. However, a police report in English to the Embassy of Bangladesh included an autopsy certified by a Kyoto University forensics expert showing no signs other than drowning.

The location must have been under the Great Shijo Bridge between the Kawaramachi railway station and Gion, where many people stroll. Chisato and I had just returned from Tokyo to find roof damage and glass strewn in front of our house from the devastating Typhoon Jebi, which had closed the Kansai International Airport and caused untold damage to the region and its economy, along with 11 reported deaths. Just before the drowning, in early September of 2018, I had returned to my usual hiking around Kyoto, but trees were felled like tenpins in the mountains surrounding the city, and the river Kamogawa under the Shijo bridge was still high and raging. Evidently Numair was an uncounted casualty of the typhoon, one of Japan’s real killers.

Before and after Typhoon Jebi: a landmark willow tree by a picturesque pond in Maruyama Park, where I had worn a festival jimbei for cosplay, turned into a weeping willow. No one will advertise this, but it will take some time for nature to recover its full splendor in Kyoto and around the Kansai region.

Only climate change could account for the series of disasters during the summer, the hottest long heat wave ever in many regions, and the flooding that killed 238 people in Western Japan. The M6.6 earthquake that blacked out the northern island of Hokkaido was normal, while the M6.1 earthquake was in a surprising location in northern Osaka Prefecture. It was nearly under our house, yet it did not cause damage like the hurricane winds of Typhoon Jebi. While Japan is a very safe country in public places, the sudden natural disasters, including volcanic eruptions and tsunami threatening whole coastal regions, are Japan’s real killers.

Hearing about the supposed murder, I first contacted a journalist of the dark side of Japan, but could not send any business his way, as this is no country for a crime reporter. He did observe that people wish to read some greater meaning into what may simply be random events, and it was unfortunate that the promising career of a scholar from a developing country was cut short. As could be seen in the imaginings of the family about an unfamiliar country, one of the first stages of grief is denial, though all roads lead to acceptance.
World Heritage temples like Ninnaji (upper left photo) suffered only minor damage from Typhoon Jebi, but in the mountains behind Ninnaji (upper right) and other sites, the damage was much greater.

Visitors often complain about the crowds, but paths behind many temples lead to forests or further religious sites you can have all to yourself. At the back of Ninnaji I noticed a sign indicating a mini-pilgrimage of 88 temples, usually a microcosm of the Pilgrimage of Shikoku with a stone statue from each of the sacred sites around the island of Shikoku. But the whole mountain behind Ninnaji was filled with an unheralded maze of 88 small temple buildings, including the remarkable Buddhist statues pictured in this article. I saw about one other person per hour and, without water, was nearing the condition of the fallen statue above, wondering how long until my body would be found.
It is generally better to get information about the target area first, although it is more exciting to explore unknown paths, and brave occasional warning signs about snakes, thieving monkeys, wild boars or bears, usually written only in Japanese! Not to worry, though, as you are more likely to see deer occasionally, and other pleasant surprises off the beaten path in Kyoto.

In conclusion, an international incident was averted, and understanding from afar of Japan’s orderliness was increased, yet the wounds will remain for some seasons in the exquisite nature around Kyoto from an especially powerful typhoon, one of Japan’s only real killers.

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