

Kon Wajirō, Modernologist

Tom Gill

The Great Kantō Earthquake of 1923 killed 140,000 people and reduced most of Tokyo and Yokohama to charred rubble. Disasters of this magnitude make an enormous impact not just on the infrastructure and economy of a nation but also on the way people think. The fiasco of World War II, with its disturbing moral implications, has informed the work of a generation of postwar writers, most famously that of Nobel Prize laureate Ōe Kenzaburō. The Great Kantō Earthquake was the central event in the career of a pioneering cultural anthropologist, Kon Wajirō (1888-1973).

In his mid-30s, Kon was already well established as a professor in the architecture department of Waseda University. He was interested in the study of rural folklore then being made popular by the great Yanagita Kunio (1875-1962), of whom Kon was something of a disciple. But the earthquake was the great turning point in Kon's career: his *Road to Emmaus*. As he picked his way through the rubble of Tokyo, he ran into a fellow ethnographer, who said, "Well, now we can do our research without going to the country, eh?" (*Jūkyō-ron* (On Housing) [Tokyo: Domes Publishers, 1971], 299). Kon agreed. The inhabitants of a prosperous modern city had suddenly been knocked back to the Stone Age. Surely they would reveal their essential character in their response to the changed situation.

Kon was amazed at the creativity of the survivors, who had improvised homes out of any pieces of wood and metal they could lay their hands on. There was a great variety of styles: some had built their shacks around the trunks of live trees, creating the central pillar that is a feature of traditional Japanese homes; others had used the wooden tablets from graveyards as structural supports. Thus were traditions respected but taboos broken in the special post-disaster conditions.

Kon and his great friend Yoshida Kanekichi started to draw sketches of these

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ingenious makeshift constructions, and the result was a survey published in 1927 as *Shinsai Barakku no Kaiko* (Earthquake Barracks in Retrospect). But Kon was also an ingenious man; as well as admiring and documenting the makeshift residences, he would offer to paint them for a consideration. He and Yoshida founded their own company, the Barrack Decoration Co., and usually had a couple of paint pots with them as they explored the wreckage.

As the two men toured the shattered city, sketching and noting all they saw, it occurred to Kon that they were working like archaeologists, only in the ruins of a modern city rather than an ancient one. There seemed to be no precise word for what they were doing, so he invented one. Taking the word for archaeology, *kōkogaku*, he removed the central character *ko*, meaning "old," and replaced it with *gen*, meaning "the present." The new word was *kōgengaku*, or "archaeology of the present day." He later translated the word into English as "modernology," but preferred to use the Esperanto equivalent, *modernologio*.

Kon's studies developed in tandem with the reconstruction of Tokyo. First he observed how the simple huts thrown up in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake were gradually replaced by barracks, a more substantial form of temporary residence, and then by permanent houses. Each stage required a higher degree of organization and cooperation. It was like watching thousands of years of social development compressed into a few months. Then, as the bustle returned to the streets of Tokyo, Kon realized that cities did not have to be reduced to rubble before one could observe them, and he applied his new approach to hundreds of facets of contemporary life, mostly around Tokyo. In part, this was a serious attempt to apply archaeological principles to modern life. But as the play on words suggested, there was also an impish dig at the prevailing assumption that the ancient and eminent were somehow more worthy of study than the ordinary folk of the present.

I

Kon was slight of build. He had an infectious smile and, behind heavy glasses, the beady eyes of an inveterate collector. He collected nuggets of sociocultural information the way a magpie collects small, shiny objects and delighted in quantifying and analyzing aspects of life that many academics would consider trivial.

He was born July 10, 1888, in the northern city of Hirosaki, Aomori Prefecture. As a child, he enjoyed "quietly constructing living spaces for myself in the attic" (*Kōgengaku Nyūmon* (Modernology for Beginners) [Tokyo: Chikuma Bunko, 1987], 403). He had a poor record at school and failed the university entrance exam. He managed to enter the design department at the Tokyo Fine Arts School, graduating in 1912.

He soon got a job as a teaching assistant at the newly formed architecture department of Waseda University, where he was taught by Satō Kōichi. Satō was an associate of Yanagita, the founder of Japanese ethnography. Yanagita's program was to

reconstruct "traditional Japan," and this entailed countless field trips to remote villages to study their customs and ceremonies. Typically, Yanagita would take a team of researchers with him, members of a group he founded called the White Reed Society. Members included Satō and Ishiguro Tada'atsu (1884-1960), a future Cabinet minister with an interest in agricultural reform, later to be an important patron of Kon's work. Kon would be taken along to draw sketches of the homes and artifacts.

He made his first trip with Yanagita in 1917 and was promoted to full professor by Waseda in 1920, just eight years after joining the university. It was a post he would hold for the rest of his career. By 1922, he was making solo trips at the request of the Ministry of Agriculture and Commerce to record rural housing styles that were fast disappearing. One government mission that year took him to Korea for a major comparative study. These early field trips were the start of a lifelong interest in housing, and Kon's book *Nihon no Minka* (The Japanese House, 1922) remains a classic of architectural literature. His sketches and comments add up to an eloquent tribute to the stylistic range of Japanese housing. Some of Kon's floor plans of Taishō period (1912-1926) housing in Hokkaido, for instance, show houses with 15 or 20 rooms on a single floor.

With this background, in a sense it was perfectly natural for Kon to turn his magpie eyes to the improvised housing thrown up after the Great Kantō Earthquake. But in another sense it was almost revolutionary. For the first time, the techniques of the Yanagita field study were applied to a big city, and to special circumstances (the aftermath of an earthquake) that had nothing to do with traditional social relations. Also, the folklorists' principle of studying the common folk had a different significance in the city, where class divisions ran deeper. Much of Kon's work focused on the working class and the poor and had liberal political implications.

In December 1925, the women's magazine *Fujin Kōron* published Kon's classic study of the poverty-stricken Tokyo underclass in the slum districts of Honjo and Fukagawa. This and many other reports were compiled into a book, *Modernologia* (1930), coedited by Kon and Yoshida. It was an immediate bestseller.

From 1929 to 1930, Kon made a tour of Europe and the United States and attempted to apply the modernological method outside Japan. He spent four months in Paris, enjoying a Bohemian lifestyle and observing the latest fashions, especially skirt lengths and hair styles. Several magazine articles by Kon appeared in 1931, mostly focusing on Western clothing styles. He was fascinated with the correlation between women's hemlines and economic trends, which was just being debated at the time.

Modernology meant a break with Yanagita and mainstream folklore studies. Kon often said that Yanagita threw him out of the movement. Yanagita denied this, insisting that Kon had run off of his own accord. In any case, as Fujimori Terunobu, University of Tokyo professor of architecture, has argued, the two men had sharply contrasting approaches. Yanagita always searched for what could not be seen — beliefs and ideas — while Kon naturally focused on what could be seen — houses, clothing, artifacts. This

difference made them the ideal combination but also pointed to the parting of the ways.

The heyday of modernology was between 1924 and 1932, although Kon only popularized the word in 1927, at the time of the Kinokuniya exhibition. He never entirely abandoned the modernological approach, but his interests became more diverse in later years, spanning housing, home economics, design aesthetics, and the history and comparative culture of clothing. After the war, he once again crossed the line between academia and business when he turned his attention to industrial design. Aided by sponsors in the textile, clothing and distribution industries, he developed improved workers' uniforms and factory interior design. Ever the practical man, he is also credited with the invention of the wing-collar shirt.

In 1967, Kon published an autobiography with the characteristically eccentric title *Jampā wo Kite Yonjū Nen* (Forty Years Wearing a Jumper). His shabby jumper, which he viewed as a symbol of the virtues of a frugal lifestyle, was a personal trademark. He hated to wear a tie, and it is of course impossible to wear one with a wing-collar shirt. He lived with his mother for many years but married in his 40s and raised a family. He was awarded the grand prize of the Japan Association for the Study of Architecture in 1971, and his collected works were published in 1972. He died the following year.

II

Kon was a prolific writer whose works crossed academic divisions with ease. The following is a brief account of a small selection of his massive opus.

Tokyo Ginza Machi Fūzoku Kiroku (A Record of Public Manners on the Ginza, 1925). In May 1925, Kon undertook a massive operation at the Ginza, then the undisputed fashion center of Tokyo. This was his first big project, and dozens of volunteers were enlisted, including journalists, sociologists, artists, soldiers and students. It was like a surrealistic game of golf. As well as doing many surveys himself, Kon issued score cards to his helpers, detailing the information they were to gather, and sent them off to prearranged vantage points around the Ginza. They would fill in the cards and return to base for more. Over three days, he collected a vast body of data on the Ginza street population.

The overwhelming dominance of the youthful male is striking. With combined samples in excess of 1,000, Kon found that men outnumbered women roughly two to one. The modal age range was 20 to 29, with a substantial majority under 35. Today, one suspects, Ginza folk are older and a lot more of them are women.

In 1929, Kon and his team made a major comparative survey in the coastal town of Otaru, Hokkaido. In a single day, they counted no fewer than 9,036 passersby, of whom 72 percent were male. But on his trip to Europe and the United States, Kon noted that numbers of men and women seemed roughly equal in fashionable districts comparable to the Ginza. Apparently the Taishō democracy had still left a lot of women at home.

The study of clothing styles showed another powerful gender division. Sixty-seven percent of Ginza men wore Western-style clothing—suits and coats—against 33 percent still using the kimono. But 99 percent of the women were wearing kimono and just 1 percent dresses and coats. Later in the year, Kon conducted a survey of the suburban area around Nakano, Asagaya, and Kōenji, where there were far more children, and found the gender gap narrowing. Among the youngsters, 75 percent of boys and 60 percent of girls were in Western-style clothing.

Ginza colors were subdued and strongly dictated by fashion. One survey found that nearly 50 percent of all Western-style outfits were in the *shimo-furi* (salt-and-pepper; black-and-white speckles) style, with 25 percent black, 15 percent navy blue, and just a few cases of striped, brown and iridescent silk clothing. Students and workers were omitted. The hats, too, were nearly all brown, gray, or black. Only scarves brightened up the scene—nearly 40 percent were pink.

Other studies covered collars; watch-chains; neckties; footwear; gloves; kimono material, design and color; hats; glasses; items being carried; pipes and cigarettes; facial hair; hairstyles; clothing accessories and handbags. A study of how women walked found that two-thirds had their toes pointed inward and most of the others pointed straight ahead. Only a few younger women flouted convention and stuck their toes outward.

Class distinctions come through clearly in these street surveys. Whether the modernologists were looking at Ginza, Nakano, or remote Otaru, they always found it easy to distinguish between *shinshi* (gentlemen) and *rōdōsha* (workers). Clothing, manner, and patterns of behavior were totally different. The picture that emerges is of a rigid class system.

Honjo Fukagawa Himmin-kutsu Fukin Fūzoku Saishū (A Compilation of Social Manners around the Slums of Honjo and Fukagawa, 1925). For one rainy week in October 1925, Kon, Yoshida and Arai Motoo, a colleague, hung out in the slums on the east bank of the Sumida River. Kon observes that this "ironical river" is a powerful class divider: the east side is a "different country," a great seamless slum (*Modernologia*, 120). He quotes another study of Honjo that found 1,560 dwellings per acre, against a conventional reckoning of 12 to 15 small houses per acre in an average residential district of the time. He observes houses with a floor area of six, three or even two tatami mats—human dwellings little bigger than dog kennels. The ordinary homes here, he noted, were just like the temporary shacks thrown up after the earthquake in the rest of Tokyo. Elsewhere, day laborers were living three to a three-mat room at flophouses charging them 30 sen a night each for the privilege. Many could not afford even this and just stood around in the street. None had families. There were bars everywhere.

Other parts of the slum were made up of large factories surrounded by the homes of the workers. These men had just enough income to support family life, and the areas with their houses were more peaceful than the flophouse zones. However, as he toured the district after dark, Kon could not help thinking that "these little households

were somehow more miserable" than the solitary day laborers. They at least could get heartily drunk and lose themselves in dreams. Drunks he describes as "a medal on the chest of the slum, an ornament" (*Modernologio*, 122-123).

It was undercover work. To avoid upsetting the locals, Kon and his associates wrote and sketched in memo pads concealed in their pockets. One street survey counted 161 passersby and found 38 artisans, 34 laborers, 23 "lads," 21 housewives, 14 tradesmen, 18 children (10 girls and eight boys), four office workers, four young ladies, three old people and two maidservants. Nowadays the modern equivalent of Fukagawa—Sanya—has almost no children or housewives but far more old people. The population observed by Kon suggests a variety and vitality now much diminished. But Kon is not impressed. He compared the day laborers unfavorably with ants: At least ants move around in search of food, whereas the laborers just stand around apathetically waiting for someone to give them a job.

The Kinokuniya Exhibition (1927). From October 15 to 21, 1927, there was an exhibition of 53 kōgengaku surveys at the Kinokuniya bookshop in Tokyo by Kon, Yoshida, Arai and Koike Tomihisa. The exhibition was titled *Shirabemono* (Inquiries) and subtitled Kōgengaku. This was the first use of the word, thought up by Kon, as he admits, because "Inquiries" on its own did not sound weighty enough. The exhibits covered a bewildering variety of topics, including jockeys' uniforms; ways of carrying babies; rural toilets; night-soil boxes in slum tenements; restaurant signboard designs; distribution of people reading books without buying them in a bookshop; analysis of how and where wine glasses tend to break; ditto for teacups; trash can designs from all over Japan; sewage pipes of Yamanote, Tokyo's inner circle, and Shitamachi compared; distribution of peddlers' stalls at various shrine festivals; personal possessions of a student; ditto for a carpenter and flower-seller of Fukagawa; and grave-stone designs.

One exhibit was a pair of studies of Tokyo's Inokashira Park. The first features a map showing the distribution of people having picnics on an April afternoon in 1926. A homemade notation indicates gender and age. The map accompanying the second study plots the locations of suicides in the period from 1925 to 1927, with Kon noting that sometimes the same tree was popular both as shade for a picnic and as a handy place to hang oneself.

As for the cracked teacups, this little project reveals much about the Kon approach. He and his modernological mates were shocked at the state of the cups at "a certain canteen" that they often used. (One naturally suspects the Waseda University canteen.) They made their own notebooks by binding together mimeographed sheets, each with a plan and elevation of a teacup on it. They would smuggle these notebooks into the canteen and then secretly draw in the cracks, blemishes and chips on the cup in which they were given their green tea. After a week, they had 48 sketches of teacups in dreadful condition.

Kon took great pride in this seemingly pointless exercise. The cups were a vivid illustration of the poverty of the times; they were also a particularly literal example

of archaeological techniques being applied to modern life (and indeed, better cups have doubtless been dug up from neolithic settlements); and the project had the practical effect of shaming the canteen into replacing the offending objects.

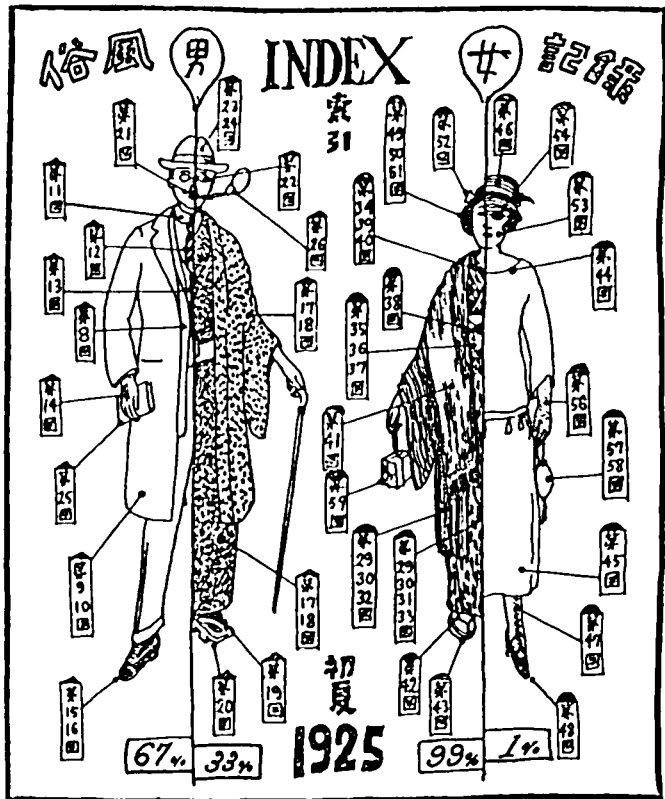
Interior surveys (1925-31). Kon often tried to apply the modernological method to the interiors of private residences, hoping material details would throw light on the nature of class divisions.

For me the most interesting of the interior surveys is "Diagram of Traffic within a Residence" (1931), which appeared in the second modernological book, *Kōgengaku Saishū* (Modernological Collection, 1931). The actual work was

done by a disciple, Iketani Sadao, with Kon supplying the commentary. The diagram shows the ground floor of a fairly wealthy middle-class household and counts the number of times each member went through each door on October 14, 1931. The maid went through the kitchen door 181 times, the wife 88 times and the (apparently adult) son four times. The master of the house did not pass through the kitchen door once. Elsewhere the diagram tells a similar story of frantic female bustle around slow-moving, sedentary males. The women even go to the toilet three times as often as the men, though Kon does not know how many of these visits were for maintenance purposes.

The survey was conducted by hanging up a piece of paper and pen by each door and asking the household members to put a mark by their name each time they went past. The result is modernology at its best. The survey lays bare and quantifies acute gender and class divisions; at the same time, it has obvious practical applications for rationalizing room layout.

Later works. Some critics say that modernology was a spent force by 1933, but



The index to Kon's 1925 Ginza study, showing Western and Japanese styles. (Reprinted from *Modernology for Beginners*, Chikuma Bunko, 1987)

as late as 1937 Kon got together with the editors of *Fujin no Tomo*, another women's magazine, to organize a massive simultaneous survey of women's clothing, hairstyles and makeup in 19 cities throughout Japan. More than 25,000 women were observed, mostly between 3:00 P.M. and 4:00 P.M. on May 1. The percentage wearing Western clothing had risen to 26 percent from the 1 percent recorded in the Ginza survey of 1925, with some provincial cities ahead of Tokyo. Shamefully enough, the survey included Changchun, Dalian, Seoul and Taipei among its "Japanese cities," and amazingly the traditional clothing of China and Korea was counted as "Western style." This somewhat inflated the figures.

But this study seems to have been the swan song of modernology. By this time, the people's lives were being observed by secret police rather than amateur researchers, and the spirit of democracy, rationality and progress that gave birth to the movement was gone. However, Kon did occasionally use the old survey techniques after the war, one interesting case being his survey of product clearinghouses in 1948, a study of the government-authorized swap shops set up inside department stores to enable their customers to barter for everyday necessities in the hard years after defeat in the war, when the cash economy was ruined and the stores had precious little to sell. Kon drew up charts of goods deposited and goods wanted, and found that flour was gradually turning into an unofficial currency (the government having banned rice from being exchanged at the swap shops). Flour was the most desired item, followed by those other essentials of life, alcohol and tobacco.

One customer, he found, had brought in a live goat that he wanted to trade for a bale of hay—presumably to feed the rest of his goats. This kind of resourceful improvisation under difficult conditions was what Kon most admired.

III

It is easy to read Kon's work and say "So what?" In his heyday, Kon was frequently accused of being an intellectual featherweight, or a mere journalist, and of having too much fun. He used to reply that these criticisms of the fledgling modernology were like criticizing a baby for not wearing a silk hat.

Admittedly, Kon does leave himself vulnerable to this kind of criticism. He rarely offers sophisticated theoretical interpretations of his own materials. He freely admits the limitations of his work, apologizing for the smallness of his population samples (apparently preferring to apologize rather than to go out and take the trouble of gathering extra data). He would probably have to plead guilty to being the kind of anthropologist that Edmund Leach contemptuously described as "a butterfly collector" (*Rethinking Anthropology*, [London: The Athlone Press, 1961], 2).

But what lovely butterflies he did collect. Kon's drawings and diagrams are works of art as well as social science. Even his bar charts are a delight to behold, their bars meandering mazily over the page when they get too long to fit on the paper. He started in the fine arts, and perhaps his surveys would have struck more of a chord

with the Dada artists who also flourished in the 1920s than with any school of social science. His partner, Yoshida, went on to a successful career as a stage designer.

Besides, the "So what?" criticism misses the point. Kon knew that things that do not seem to matter very much are what really show you the nature of a culture. Freed from necessity, culture can express itself openly. His cultural minutiae always suggest interpretations when looked at 70 years later; and these days, his own disinclination to impose meanings on the material looks almost postmodern. At any rate, he has left us with a precious mine of cultural information on the 1920s and 1930s.

His methods, too, constitute an intriguing challenge to orthodox anthropology. About the same time Kon was launching modernology, Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942) was popularizing the technique of participant observation, following his pioneering fieldwork in the Trobriand Islands during World War I. Malinowski advocated prolonged immersion in an alien culture, sharing the lives of the people as far as possible in an attempt to understand the society and culture. Kon was playing the opposite game: focusing on his own culture rather than some distant exotic people and seeking to detach himself from it as far as possible in the pursuit of scientific objectivity, a sort of nonparticipant observation. As he put it, "We sort of looked at the things before our eyes as curious objects, the same as artifacts of a thousand years ago" (*Kōgengaku* (*Modernologio*) [Tokyo: Domes Publishers, 1971], 18).

This principle of detachment extended to the personal lives of Kon and his disciples. None were full-time modernologists, but they lived self-consciously Bohemian lifestyles, or, as Kon put it, "whether by chance or nature . . . we did not live the usual customary lifestyle of the present age" (*Modernologio*, 17). Kon's insistence on wearing his shabby jumper while taking a keen interest in fashion is a case in point. He compares his relationship with his subjects to that between "a civilized person and a savage, a doctor and his patient or a judge and a criminal" (*Modernologio*, 17). In short, he sought to establish among fellow urban Japanese the very same relationship that Malinowski sought to destroy between the "civilized person" and the "savage."

Again, while Malinowski insisted on the importance of spending years over fieldwork, many of Kon's surveys took just 15 or 20 minutes to complete. As one of Kon's friends remarked on seeing him shuffling the index cards from one of his surveys, "It's amazing what dilettantism can achieve" (*Modernologio*, 57). Similarly, while the Western style of fieldwork pioneered by Malinowski was usually a solitary activity, Kon followed Yanagita in working in teams, a characteristic of Japanese ethnography to this day.

But the most striking difference of all between the Kon and Malinowski approaches is that Kon shows no interest in the views of the common people who were his subjects. We learn all about what they wore, how they walked and where they lived, but their voices we do not hear. He seems not to have recorded a single comment. Instead, he ruthlessly pursued the idea of modern archaeology, treating the people he was researching as if they were long dead and concentrating on their architecture and

artifacts. This is what distinguishes Kon from other prewar social observers like the Mass Observation movement in Britain, for whom the interview was the primary research technique.

Why no interviews? Partly, no doubt, because of Kon's obsession with the scientific, archaeological approach, which left no room for the subjective accounts of unreliable human beings. But he also seems to have been a rather shy man. In Fukagawa, he describes being deeply moved by the sight of half-starved day laborers but does not mention having spoken to any of them; in the Tokyo suburb of Asagaya, he says he had to count the pedestrians surreptitiously, while walking along the street in the opposite direction, for fear he would arouse suspicion. There is this furtive element to quite a few of the Kon surveys, and one senses the insecurity of a natural outsider, never quite sure of his own position in Japan's class-ridden prewar society.

Today, although there is no university with a department of modernology, followers of Kon are still to be found dotted around Japanese academia. The word *kōgengaku* has entered the Japanese language, being used by journalists to add a pseudo-academic, off-beat ring to lightweight articles about city life. Kon probably would not have minded; he himself ignored the academic/popular distinction. He also liked to speculate about the possibility of "applied modernology," whereby his surveying principles would be harnessed to commercial benefit. Applied modernology is now a major force in contemporary society, only it is called market research.

Kon is little known outside Japan, but in many ways his work anticipated that of far better known anthropologists. The study of material culture and consumption is probably the fastest growing field of anthropology in the world; kitchen design and behavior in hamburger restaurants are legitimate subjects of study; and in archaeology, "rubbish theorists" are analyzing modern and ancient culture by trawling through the contents of garbage dumps. These snappers-up of unconsidered trifles are spiritual cousins of Kon Wajirō.

The other great thing about Kon-style cultural anthropology is that anyone can do it. You do not need to study an exotic language and spend a year or two living in a mud hut. All you need is a pen, the back of an envelope, and half an hour to spare. After all these years, Kon's surveys are crying out for follow-up studies. Such an exercise would produce a fascinating picture of the shifting colors and textures of everyday life in 20th-century Japan.