Evolution of the Catfish (namazu) as an earthquake symbol in Japan

G. SMITS, The Pennsylvania State University, gjs4@psu.edu; R. LUDWIN, University of Washington, rludwin@u.washington.edu

ABSTRACT

Namazu, the earthquake-causing subterranean catfish of Japanese folklore, is a well-known icon of earthquakes famous. Following the Ansei Earthquake in late 1855, anonymous entrepreneurs produced and sold hundreds of varieties of catfish picture prints (namazu-e). Many of these 1855 prints were sophisticated examples of thinly veiled political views, using the earthquake-catfish and other symbols as cover to avoid censorship by the military government.

Graphology, textbooks, and works dealing with the social or historical ramifications of earthquakes commonly suggest an ancient origin for the earthquake catfish (Koh, 1995; Zeltinger, Ross & Sandeon, 2000; Hashida Kiyoteru, 1972). However, primary sources indicate that the earthquake-catfish only began to manifest itself in Japanese culture in the seventeenth century, and was not well known until at least a century later. Throughout the early nineteenth century, images of giant catfish occasionally appeared in the popular press in connection with stories about earthquakes, and the Namazu came to full prominence following the Ansei Earthquake of 1855, when the devastating moment of the earthquake coincided with social unrest, advances in printing technology and the need for discretion.

Tokyo 1855 - Government offers non-confrontational fill

The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were a period of social and political turmoil in Japan. The shogun's capital of Edo was in disarray, the government was reeling from the devastating impact of earthquakes, and the country was facing increasing international pressure.


Origin and historical development of the Catfish as an Earthquake symbol

A Brief Account of the Catfish (namazu) as a Cultural Symbol in Japan, 15th-20th Centuries

 did the Japanese *really* think a huge catfish caused earthquakes?


Foreign Treaties

Campanile Party and the Namazu in a context of strength, Reform stands out in the present.


References


Gourd

"The metal fishes of millenniums."