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EARTHQUAKES AND ARTS

Introduction

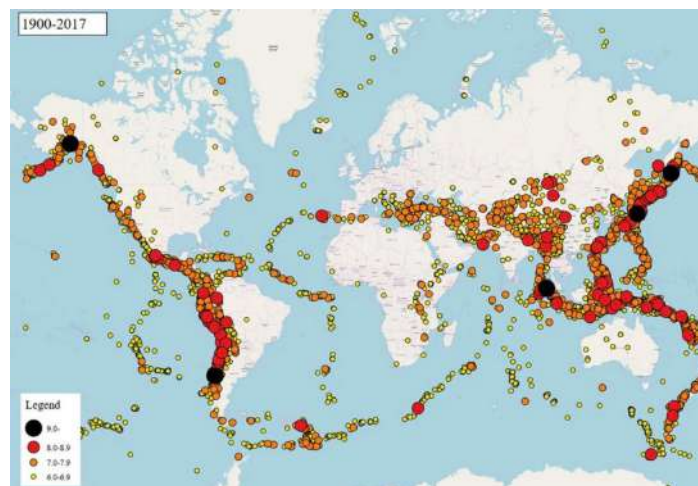
In 2023, over ten years have passed since the Tohoku disaster in 2011. It has been said that Japanese people have started to forget it over these years. However, artworks related to the Tohoku disaster have been increasing these days.

We would like to discuss the reason why artworks and art projects concerning the Tohoku disaster have become popular recently. The purpose of this paper is to show how earthquakes and fear of them are represented in Japanese arts. We will compare traditional and contemporary arts which thematize earthquakes in Japan and see what is common and different among them.

What Earthquakes Are Like in Japan

First, let us explain what earthquakes are like in Japan.

Japan is one of the most earthquake-prone countries in the world which means in effect that earthquakes are quite a common occurrence here. Their intensity varies depending on whether they are big or small, vertical or parallel.



The picture highlighted above shows earthquakes that occurred between 1900 and 2017. The darker color of the circle, the bigger scale of the earthquake. Japan is under so many circles that we could barely see Japan itself. Black circles signify earthquakes of the magnitude of 9.0 or higher. In addition, the number of earthquakes observed in 2021 was 2,424. This means that there are 6.64 earthquakes per day.

One example of an earthquake disaster is Kumamoto castle, one of the most famous castles

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in Japan. It was built in 1607. However, a big earthquake in 2016 hit Kumamoto prefecture and almost destroyed it. Full restoration is expected in 2052, meaning that it will take over 40 years to restore it.

If an earthquake occurs in a big city in Japan, it will likely bring about many problems. For example, old buildings may be vulnerable to damage. As a consequence, it will likely be impossible to drive a car in some roads due to traffic jams. Furthermore, communication failure would make it impossible to use smartphones so that people could not communicate with their family. In addition, in the case of a large earthquake, some supplies are often unavailable, such as electricity, gas, and water, so it would become difficult for people to maintain their daily life. In this paper we examine how such disasters have been represented in traditional Japanese arts.

How Earthquakes Were Represented in Traditional Japanese Arts

Interestingly enough, many Japanese painters used catfish to represent earthquakes. This was because there was a legend that when the ground shakes in an earthquake, it is because a huge subterranean catfish gets angry, and this was believed to be the reason why earthquakes occurred. Here we present two examples. The first is a Japanese proverb “Earthquake, thunder, fire, and father,” which tells about what we should fear in Japan. This painting visualizes the proverb: the leftmost character in the painting is a catfish representing an earthquake, and the demon (*oni*) next to it represents lightning. The character on the far right represents a fire as his head in a flame.



The next example is a hanging scroll depicting a catfish. Craftsmen and merchants who profited from the post-quake reconstruction economy worshipped the hanging scroll of the catfish, which is protected by a Shinto priest. Immediately after the earthquake, earthquake catfish were depicted as the evil source of disaster. However, when reconstruction work began after an earthquake in the former capital *Edo* (now Tokyo), and the reconstruction economy boomed, the catfish became a popular sight for those who profited from the economic boom, and they started to depict the catfish as a symbol of fortune.



Art Expression in Today's Japan

We will now turn to the contemporary Japanese arts which represent natural disasters.

First, we need to know about the Tohoku Earthquake. The Tohoku Earthquake occurred on March 11, 2011. The area was severely damaged by the earthquake, fire, and a big and destructive tsunami. A lot of works of arts and artistic projects have been created in relation to that day. Let us introduce an art project and an artwork.

The first one is Reborn-Art Festival. This festival is a comprehensive art festival of “art,” “music,” and “food” with Ishinomaki City, Miyagi Prefecture, as its main stage. Ishinomaki is one of the cities severely damaged by the Tohoku Earthquake. This festival uses the town under reconstruction as a venue for an art festival and exhibits works of art. The disaster area is being enlivened through this festival as a center for the arts.

The second example is an artwork titled “Ebb and Flow, Another Step”. This work was on display in an exhibition called “3.11 and the Artist: Imagining 10 Years Later,” and viewers see this work at the very beginning of the exhibition. The two artists had visited Rikuzentakata City, one of the disaster areas, many times to record the recovering landscape and the victims words. This work focuses on Rikuzentakata, where a new town has been built on the top of the damaged town by raising the roof, and tells the story of the relationship between the upper and the lower town in 2031, 20 years after the earthquake, through paintings and words. While people live in the upper town after the earthquake, the work is also oriented toward a story that can connect with the memories of the lower town that once existed. Through this work of art they try to remember the reconstruction at the time of the earthquake and after the disaster and the memories before the disaster.

Conclusion

Japan continues to suffer from earthquakes. In the past, earthquakes were represented abstractly in paintings. As we noted, a giant catfish was depicted as an earthquake motif. On the other hand, today's artists convey concrete images of earthquakes.

It is important that we do not forget the terrible effects of earthquakes and tsunami. Therefore, to make images of art is an important way to keep the memory of disasters from fading away. In addition, art should be used to help the next generation imagine and share predecessors' memories.

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