

Culture Notes

Catfish Rolling

by Clara Kumagai

Fiction, set in Japan

Amulet Books, 2023

2023 Honorable Mention, Freeman Book Award for Young Adult/High School Literature

For centuries, large catfish were associated with earthquakes in Japan. There was a common belief that catfish caused earthquakes as they swam through underwater rivers and seas, thrashing their tails. A Shinto deity, Kashima Daimyōjin, was believed to be able to calm earthquakes by riding catfish and controlling them by pressing on their heads. Thus, the catfish became a symbol of earthquakes in Japan.



Kashima Daimyōjin controlling a catfish, woodblock print, 1855
(artist unknown; International Research Center for Japanese Studies)

Japan lies along four tectonic plates with over two thousand active faults, exposing the islands to frequent earthquakes.

According to a 2013 white paper, around 20% of global earthquakes that measure magnitude 6 or over occur in or around Japan (University of Tokyo website; see URL below). Earthquakes are so common in Japan that you might experience a mild one even during a short visit of several weeks, and major earthquakes have occurred throughout Japanese history. The Great Kantō Earthquake of 1923, a 7.9 magnitude quake, destroyed much of Tokyo and all of Yokohama, leaving more than 110,000 people dead. The Hanshin Earthquake of 1995 leveled much of Kobe; it struck early in the morning, trapping people alive in areas of town that had traditional buildings with heavy tile roofs. The March 2011 Tōhoku (pronounced: TOE-HO-koo) earthquake (9.1 magnitude) and tsunami that hit the northeastern part of the main island of Honshu (pronounced: HONE-shoe) left over 18,000 people dead (the true number is unknown); the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant was crippled beyond repair, with the area around it rendered unlivable from radioactive pollution.





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A nineteenth-century example pertains most closely to *Catfish Rolling*. In 1855, a devastating 7.0 magnitude event known as the Ansei-Edo Earthquake struck the city of Edo (now Tokyo), killing an estimated eight to ten thousand people. Out of this disaster came a new type of woodblock print, called *namazu-e* ("catfish prints"), after the Japanese word for catfish (*namazu*). Designed by the writer Kanagaki Robun (1829–1894) and painter/print designer Kawanabe Kyōsai (1831–1889), these early catfish prints are thought to be subtly critical of the Tokugawa government.

A popular belief held that the chaos that followed an earthquake disaster might allow a new order in which wealth would be redistributed to the poor and class roles reversed. *Namazu-e* became hugely popular and new editions, often not finely printed or signed, proliferated during this period. Owing to the underlying subversive messages in the prints, the government soon put a stop to their production.

In recent years, research in Japan on the relationship between catfish and earthquakes has suggested that catfish may be able to sense earthquakes before they happen. Images of catfish appear in some of the materials on earthquake preparedness in Japan, including the Japan Meteorological Agency's earthquake early warning logo and the Yurekuru Call mobile app.

Resources

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