Historical Background of Togenuki Jizō in Sugamo

Kawazoe Noboru

Togenuōi Jizo, a guardian deity of children, enshrined in Banchozan Koganji-temple, located near Sugamo Station on the JR Yamanote line, attracts many worshipers from all over the Metropolitan area. Especially on the three days of four, fourteen and twenty-four of each month, all of which have a four in common, people swarm in the temple street, which is lined up on both sides with many stalls set up by vendors. The worshipers include many elderly women, who have increasingly visited the temple in the last ten years. Due to the similarity that these elderly women are attracted to Togenuki Jizō with that many youngsters are attracted to Takesita-dori street in Harajuku, the street is now called “elderly women’s Harajuku,” a new type of religio-festive space in Tokyo, symbolizing the aging society in Japan.

In Edo period, various objects of worship appeared and disappeared as fashionable deities. Togenuki Jizō was just one of those fashionable deities to be enshrined in the precincts of Koganji-temple, which was originally located in Byobu Sakashita, Shimotani. In the revolution of 1868, the first year of Meiji period, when Buddhism was disestablished and disendowed, Koganji-temple decided for their own survival to install this guardian deity of children to replace their principal image of Buddha. They soon initiated various activities to attract worshipers when they coincidentally had to move to Sugamo, its present location, because of the construction of Ueno Station on their original location. One of the major successes of their extensive activities was the invitation to their temple festival of stall-keepers and street vendors.

In terms of the number of participating stall-keepers and vendors, the Koganji-temple festival grew to be one of the major festivals in Tokyo before the Second World War and has become the biggest one after the war, resulting in enhanced popularity of Togenuki Jizō. When the rapid economic growth period was over, however, the number of stall-keepers and vendors decreased and since some of them have been replaced by various retail-stores along the street. The number of elderly women visiting the street to the temple has increased instead, and they have made a distinctive feature of the street.
Such a historical background as described above has produced several unique worshipping manners including incense-burning and scrubbing the deity with a tawashi, or a scrubber, serving to make elderly female worshipers feel more secure with whatever faith they may have. Elderly women enjoy fashion viewing, shopping, and dining as well as they pay worshipping visits to the deity, and return with their souvenirs to their family members or neighbors for their renewed acquaintance with the people around them.