Nagasaki Kunchi Festival Reconsidered: The Nagasaki Kunchi as Castle Town Festival

KURUSHIMA Hiroshi

The Nagasaki Kunchi festival, which currently takes place from the 7th through the 9th of October, has undergone various changes since its beginnings in the early Edo period, but it continues today to fascinate both spectators and participants and is considered a representative Japanese festival. In fiscal year 2001, the National Museum of Japanese History (Rekihaku) produced a folk-studies documentary titled Furyu no matsuri: Nagasaki Kunchi (Elegant Festival: The Nagasaki Kunchi), during the making of which it was discovered that a large body of visual materials related to the Nagasaki Kunchi still exists from the Edo period and later. In particular, the Nagasaki Suwa-jinja saireizu byobu (Folding Screen of the Suwa Shrine Festival in Nagasaki), part of Rekihaku’s collection, was rediscovered. (Partly because of a non-descript label, “Illustration of a Shrine Visit,” the screen, which was purchased in 1985, had lain dormant in the museum’s repository). Accordingly, the author introduces this folding screen in detail. Other historical materials in visual form are also used to study the characteristics of the Nagasaki Kunchi festival of the Edo period.

Another modern urban festival, the Toshogu Sairei, also has its beginnings in early Edo period cities (i.e., castle towns of the mid-seventeenth century). By studying this festival, the author seeks to clarify the characteristics of castle town festivals in the Edo period. Relying on prior scholarship, he examines the features of Toshogu Sairei festivals in Okayama, Tottori, Wakayama, and Nagoya prefectures, focusing especially on the points they have in common with each other as castle town festivals. Comparing the results of this survey with the characteristics of the Nagasaki Kunchi festival seen in visual materials, the author finds that the two festivals shared much in common.

Today the Nagasaki Kunchi is not easily recognized as a castle town festival of the Edo period; it lacks the shinji noh (religious Noh play) and horseback archery typical of such festivals. In view of the above examination, however, the author concludes that the Nagasaki Kunchi festival of the Edo period was a typical castle town festival.