Study of Samuhara Belief: Transformation from Protection against Injuries to Protection against Bullets

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“Samuhara,” which is a group of letters like unfamiliar kanji, appears very often in senninburi, which is a charm against bullets during the war, and hinomaru yosegaki. The letters were not only written on senninburi but also on clothes and pieces of paper to be carried as charms and appear in wartime materials in various forms, which indicates that the custom was what could be called the samuhara belief.

The wartime samuhara belief would have been focused on a single belief to protect against bullets. However, when it started in the Edo period, its contents varied from protection against injuries to that against insects, and earthquakes, etc. Essays from the Edo period, including “Mimibukuro,” often introduce these strange letters or kanji, known as fuji.

During the Meiji period, these letters played an important role as a charm against bullets in wars against other countries, such as the Sino-Japanese War and the Russo-Japanese War. They were also distributed as charms to the soldiers who went to war, and became known among soldiers as a popular belief to protect against bullets.

In particular, Tanaka Tomisaburo took the initiative to ensure the samuhara belief was known nationwide. Because of him, the wartime samuhara belief spread nationwide and was inherited by the current samuhara shrine.

The study of these folk beliefs is important for the following reasons. Unlike talismans authorized by religions, folk beliefs were born from popular beliefs. They gradually gained various meanings until eventually the miracles were believed in by people and became established. Wartime people attempted to surpass the reality by trusting in such folk beliefs.

Various anecdotes were added to the original folk beliefs to make them more plausible in each period. Both interpretations of each period and an overview of the changes in folk beliefs over history will be necessary for the study.

Although there have been many studies of the samuhara belief, they are fragmented, and none provide an overview of the complete history to the present. This article is an attempt to provide an overview of the samuhara belief from the Edo period when it started to the present.

Key words: Folk belief, religious belief, war, fuji, protection against bullets, protection against injuries