Expressions of Disasters in the Publishing from the End of Edo to Meiji Period: Focusing on the Depictions of Scenes

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The great earthquake that hit the southern Kantō region on the second day of the tenth month of Ansei 2 (1855) caused immense damage, especially in the downtown of Edo. This Great Earthquake of the Ansei Era was featured in various publications, such as newsheets describing the impact of the disaster with simple illustrations and texts, booklets containing the accounts of the aftermath and the narratives of victims of the calamity, and cartoons and caricatures depicting the giant catfish which was allegedly living under the ground and to which the catastrophe was attributed (the drawings were known as “Namazu-e”). These historical sources are attracting increasing attention from folklorists and historians who study disasters. In contrast, despite including fine drawings and paintings of the scene of the catastrophe, these historical materials have not been fully analyzed by art historians. Therefore, this paper examines the depiction of disasters in prints, especially in landscapes, which were increasingly produced after the Great Earthquake of the Ansei Era.

The single-sheet prints illustrating the Great Earthquake of the Ansei Era seem to have assumed a more important role than merely reporting the disaster situation as many of them were produced using the sophisticated technique of multicolor woodblock printing to add a sense of reality that could not be provided in simple prints such as conventional newsheets.

The expression of disaster situations in these prints reached a peak with the publication of Ansei Kenmonshi (A Chronicle of Events of the Ansei Era), which used the same illustration perspectives and bookmaking techniques as meisho zue (illustrated topographies). These devices and techniques are also observed in contemporary publications such as Ansei Kenmonroku (A Record of Events of the Ansei Era) and Ansei Fûbunshû (A Collection of Reports of Events of the Ansei Era).

The popularity of disaster paintings after the Great Earthquake of the Ansei Era led to the emergence of the genre of disaster paintings in Nishiki-e prints, though the number of such paintings remained small. In the Meiji period, drawings and paintings of earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, conflagrations, and other catastrophes were published, which led to the production of picture postcards of the Great Kantō Earthquake.

Key words: Ansei Kenmonshi, Ansei Fûbunroku, Great Earthquake of the Ansei Era, Nishiki-e, Ukiyo-e