A Folkloristic Essay on Natural Disasters: Risks and Benefits: Counterintuitive Logic Observed in Historical and Traditional Facts

SEKIZAWA Mayumi

This paper is based on the following four studies: (1) a study of the so-called riverside double grave system in the Kinokawa River Basin in Wakayama Prefecture (these graves are located on the banks and sandbars of major rivers so that the graves and bodies can be washed away by heavy rains or floods); (2) a study of the history of Heian-kyō and the Kamogawa River shores, which, as Kiyoe Öyama, Yoshihiko Amino, and others have argued, flourished as a commercial district as well as a funeral place despite their vulnerability to floods; (3) a study of the history and folk customs of mountain villages upstream of the Kamogawa River in the north of Kyoto (the villagers' graves have been built outside the watershed boundaries of the Kamogawa River Basin because of the strict restrictions placed on them to prevent impurity in the river, which had also been used by the Kyoto Imperial Palace since old times); and (4) a study of the history and folk customs of a town upstream of the Ōtagawa River in Hiroshima Prefecture, where sandbars were actively used despite their susceptibility to floods. The results of these studies indicate the following four findings: (1) there are attractive and repulsive interactions between natural disaster risks and economic benefits, and these relationships have been passed on; (2) a counterintuitive idea has developed that the inevitable impurities accumulated in the course of daily life can be periodically cleaned and washed away by natural disasters, such as floods, so as to refresh the living environment, and these customs have been passed on; (3) the traditional concept of purification of the Kamogawa River seems to have been affected by the long history of the area dating back to the Heian period, and lifestyle and cultural customs, such as the concept of the impurity of death and the sense of animal meat and blood, have changed at different times and in different ways in each region, in each case, and in each social class throughout history; and (4) all these places susceptible to river floods share the common characteristic of attracting people to come back to live there repeatedly after such disasters. From a "common sense" perspective, all possible measures should be taken to proactively prevent natural disasters and stop tragedy from repeating itself. However, in history, this common sense is sometimes overridden by emotions and beliefs, such as people's desire for better lives, ambition to make money, the concept of the impurity of death, and belief in purification. By breaking the "common sense" assumption that natural disasters are bad, this study
of disasters from the perspective of folklore focuses on the historical fact that economic activities were actively promoted in some areas despite their vulnerability to natural disasters and that even a counterintuitive idea developed that natural disasters, such as river floods, can be useful. In this study, attention is paid to the traditional custom of preventing as well as utilizing natural disasters.

Key words: Riverside double grave system, Heian-kyō, Kamogawa River, floods, prevention and utilization of natural disasters