Evolution of the Catfish (namazu) as an earthquake symbol in Japan

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ABSTRACT

Namazu, the earthquake-causing eel-like fish of Japanese folklore, is a well-known icon of earthquake folklore. Following the Ansei Edo Earthquake in late 1855, anonymous entrepreneurs produced and sold hundreds of varieties of catfish picture prints. Many of these prints were sophisticated and explicit political views, using the earthquake-catfish and other symbols to convey the zeitgeist and political climate. The birth of the namazu in Japan is a story of nationalism, political freedoms and censorship. None of the catfish prints include the required namazu-e text and are therefore not considered as namazu e. The namazu e prints were highly sophisticated and contained veiled messages. Following the Ansei Edo earthquake in 1855, many prints were made and the Japanese political climate was changed. This image suggests that the namazu e prints were made to resist Perry's demands entirely. Commodore Matthew Perry, a bannerman who lost his house in the earthquake, is depicted in namazu-e prints, and this is seen as a symbol of cabinet shakeups and other political changes in the context of parliamentary politics. In a general way, the idea of a dragon/fish originated in Daoist tradition, and the Japanese islands encircled by a serpent-like dragon. The bottle gourd would have brought to mind the image of magical power, loosely associated with the male organ. The namazu e literature is fascinating. The whole image functions as a talismanic charm to ward off the seen and unseen opponent. Samurai are rarely depicted in namazu e prints, and this is a true challenge for the historian. A catfish dressed as a wandering priest uses a Buddhist rosary to pray for the dead. The namazu e literature is fascinating. The whole image functions as a talismanic charm to ward off the seen and unseen opponent. Samurai are rarely depicted in namazu e prints, and this is a true challenge for the historian. A catfish dressed as a wandering...