

# A Brief Account of the Catfish (*Namazu*) as a Cultural Symbol in Japan, 15th-20th Centuries

鯰

The Japanese word *namazu* refers to a wide variety of fish that in English might be called catfish or bullheads.

Generally, *namazu* does not refer to a specific species of fish. In artistic and literary contexts, it is often best to think of *namazu* less as actual fish swimming around in the waterways of Japan than as cultural symbols. And what did *namazu* symbolize? When it first made an appearance in a work of Japanese highbrow art at the start of the fifteenth century, we cannot determine with certainty what *namazu* symbolized. As time went on, however, these metaphorical fish gradually began to symbolize disorder. By the late eighteenth century, the *namazu* typically stood for one specific type of disorder: earthquakes. After a large earthquake struck the shōgun's capital of Edo in 1855, hundreds of varieties of catfish picture prints (*namazu-e*) came pouring off the printing presses for sale to the public.

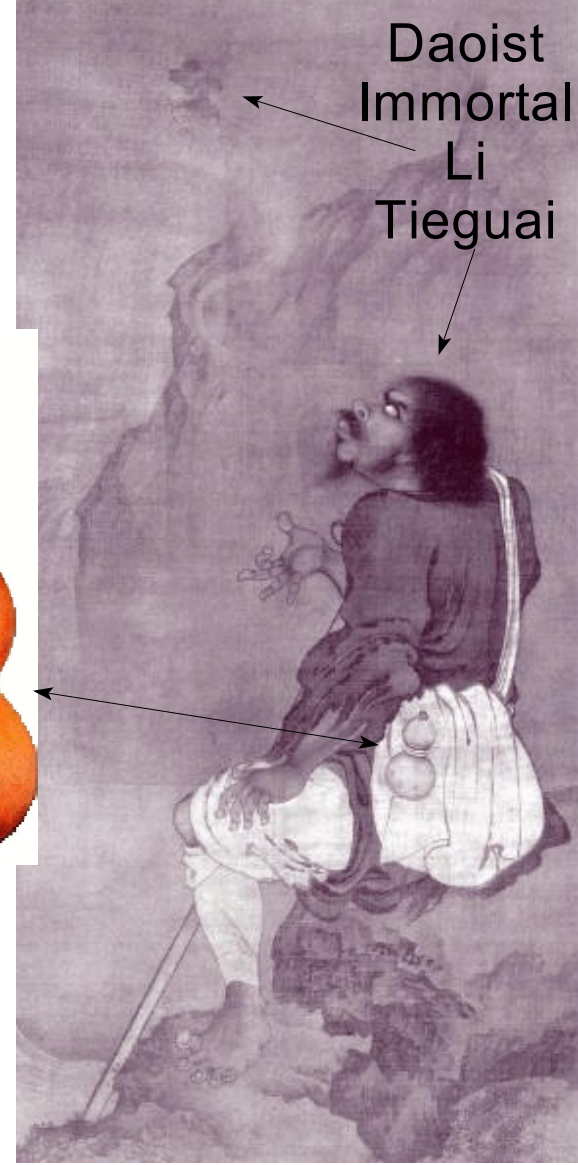
Many of these prints were highly sophisticated and contained veiled political messages. During the Meiji and Taishō eras, *namazu* in political cartoons generally stood for self-important (puffed up) government officials, but sometimes *namazu* also symbolized upheavals such as a shakeup of the cabinet. These slides introduce a few of the many aspects of this complex symbol in Japanese culture.





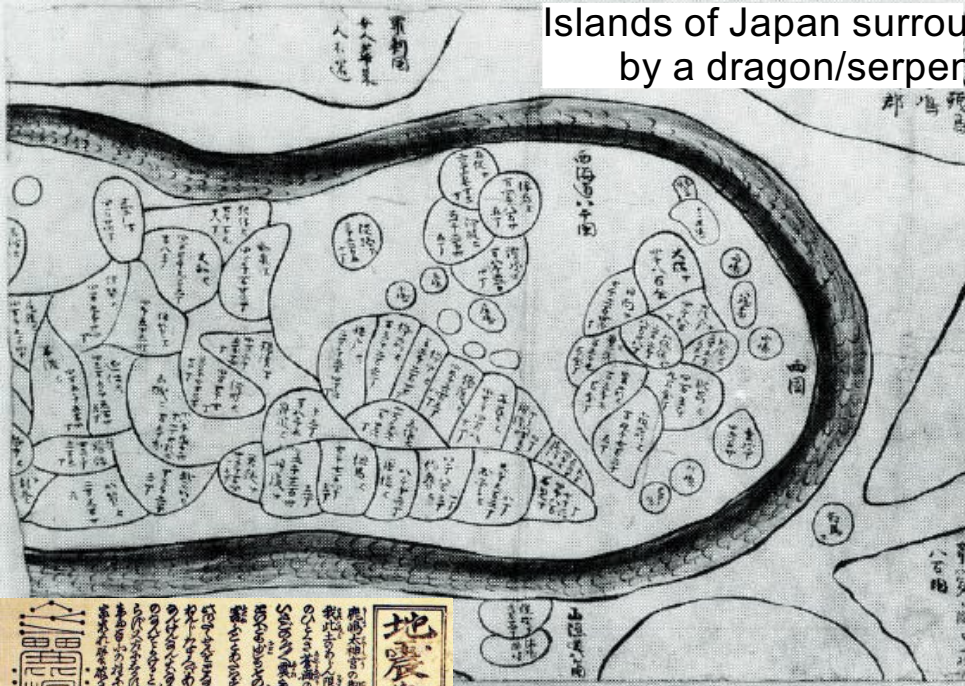
For more details on the significance and meaning of bottle gourds, see:  
<http://www.east-asian-history.net/textbooks/bottle-gourds.htm>

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The large image above is Josetsu's *Hyōnenzu* (Gourd and catfish painting), produced at some point between 1408 and 1415 for the 4th Muromachi shōgun, Yoshimochi. The painting is the first known appearance of a catfish in Japanese high culture, and it is an enigma. Nobody seems to be able to come up with a convincing reading of the painting as a whole, even though every single part of it has been analyzed in excruciating detail. We know, for example, precisely which Chinese painting served as a model for the bamboo strand jutting out from the lower left into the space just above the man's head. *Hyōnenzu* was accompanied by thirty poems, one of which explains that this man is trying to suppress the *namazu* with a bottle gourd. Contrary to many surveys of Japanese art, suppressing a catfish with a gourd was *not* a Zen riddle (*kōan*). The bottle gourd would have brought to mind in viewers the image of magical power, loosely associated with shamanism and Daoism. This image of suppressing a catfish with a gourd later became a stock metaphor in Japanese culture.



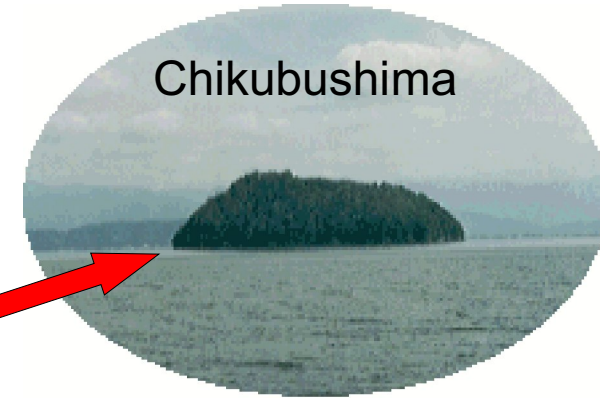


Islands of Japan surrounded by a dragon/serpent



Incense burner shaped like Penglai

Penglai



Chikubushima



Earthquakes Explained



Dragon Tail

At the time of *Hyōnenzu* (15th c.), the notion that *namazu* cause earthquakes did not exist. There were a variety of theories about earthquakes. Academic explanations inevitably postulated an imbalance in the five agents of yin and yang. Popular explanations often imagined a giant dragon or serpent moving around under the earth.

Notice here maps showing the Japanese islands encircled by a serpent-like dragon. In a general way, this idea originated in China, where mysterious islands of the immortals like Penglai were imaged to float in the sea atop the back of a giant dragon, fish, or turtle. In Japan, the island of Chikubushima in Lake Biwa was imagined similarly, as floating atop the back of a giant dragon/serpent. This dragon/serpent gradually came to be regarded as equivalent to and interchangeable with a giant *namazu*.



1793



ca. 18th c.

Kashima  
DeityFoundation  
Stone

During the 17th century, *ōtsu-e* emerged as a popular art form. *Ōtsu-e* were images produced by certain temples in the city of Ōtsu on the shores of Lake Biwa for sale to tourist-pilgrims. During the eighteenth century, one popular motif for *ōtsu-e* was the image of a person, or, more typically, a monkey, suppressing a giant *namazu* with a bottle gourd. Among other things, these images were a metaphor for the effort and determination needed to accomplish something seemingly impossible. Indeed, the word *hyōtab-namazu* (gourd-*namazu*) in contemporary Japanese has precisely this meaning (although hardly anyone would be familiar with this word today).

During the eighteenth century, the notion developed that the deity of the Kashima Shrine just north of Edo (Tokyo) pressed down on a oval-shaped boulder called the “foundation stone” (*kamame-ishi*). This boulder, in turn, pressed down on the head of a huge underground *namazu*. Unfortunately, there were times when this deity had to be out of town for meetings. At these times, or at any time the deity slackened in his attention, the giant catfish was liable to wiggle around, thus causing earthquakes. The image at top left is a float in an urban parade in Edo. It is the earliest known depiction of a giant catfish being pinned down by the foundation stone. Such images were common in popular prints made in 1855 after a large earthquake shook Edo.

1855



So, these foolish Japanese thought that a huge catfish caused earthquakes, right?



Not necessarily. First, it is important to know that *nobody* knew what caused most earthquakes until the acceptance of the theory of plate tectonics in the 1960s. Elaborate, sophisticated theories of earthquakes existed in China and Japan, and although a thorough understanding of them was generally the province of scholars and other highly educated people, ordinary people were aware of the gist of these theories. The catfish print pictured here from 1855 contains much text: an elaborate theory of earthquakes that relies in part on Chinese notions of geomancy and in part on the idea of a balance between the five agents of yin and yang. The giant catfish is a *metaphor* for this more complex process. In another catfish print, a giant catfish declares his innocence before an angry crowd, stating that everyone knows that earthquakes are caused by imbalances in yin and yang forces and that a catfish could not possibly cause them. Introductory geology texts sometimes point out that “the Japanese” all believed that a giant catfish caused earthquakes, but it is not at all clear how many Japanese really believed this notion literally. For most, the catfish was a metaphor.





In this print following the 1855 Ansei Earthquake that shook Edo, a crowd attacks the giant *namazu*. The letters in the yellow box are special Buddhist characters indicating the 4 directions plus the center, and the whole print functions as a talismanic charm to ward off further earthquakes (aftershocks continued for days afterward).





Earthquakes are bad news for those killed and seriously injured, as well as for those who lose homes and jobs as a result. Following the 1855 Ansei Earthquake, however, many of Edo's common people profited handsomely from the rebuilding. All of the construction trades as well as porters, many types of vendors, sellers of raw material like lumber, and others—probably a majority of Edo's ordinary people—profited from the earthquake. Big losers included most social elites, especially the very wealthy, who had to pay sky-high prices to have their mansions rebuilt. It was as if the earthquake was an attempt by the cosmic forces to redistribute the wealth that had been accumulating among the big merchants and other social elites. Indeed, many of the catfish picture prints regarded the earthquake as strong social medicine—with the unfortunate side effect of killing several thousand people. In the print at left, the Kashima Deity suppresses the *namazu* with his sword, while gold coins and the tools of the construction trades swirl around. At the very top is the foundation stone at the Kashima Shrine. The middle print portrays a catfish as a traditional medicine seller, with small images stuck in his straw-tipped pole being occupations profiting from the earthquake. At right, the *namazu* cuts open his belly in atonement for the shaking, from which pore gold coins. But the spirits of the dead loom ominously overhead.



## After 1855 . . .

The image at right is the cover of a humor magazine from 1923, showing Prime Minister Yamamoto Gonnohyōei being propelled into prominence by the great Kansai Earthquake of that year. Notice the *namazu*, which remained a well-recognized metaphor for earthquakes, and, in the context of parliamentary politics, a symbol of cabinet shakeups and other major changes. More commonly, *namazu* symbolized government officials, especially arrogant ones, in Meiji and Taishō era political cartoons. In the case of the 1923 earthquake, the previous prime minister, Katō, had just died. Yamamoto had been named as his successor, but had no time to appoint a cabinet before the earthquake struck. Because of the earthquake, Yamamoto was able to appoint a cabinet the very next day, thus avoiding the often lengthy wrangling and horse trading that would normally be part of that process.

Today, the *namazu* is still a symbol of earthquakes. At least two recent scientific books on earthquakes, for example, have *namazu* in their titles. For more details on *namazu* in Japanese culture, see the relevant textbook chapter (search for the word “*namazu*” to pull it up).

