

Chapter 26

Rescuing Privately-Held Historical Materials

Field of expertise: History

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Summary

The Great East Japan Earthquake of 2011 was the largest-scale disaster since the outgrowth of historical material rescue and preservation activities in the aftermath of the Hanshin-Awaji earthquake of 1995. Many historical materials were lost without their whereabouts ever having been known. At the same time, many were also recovered thanks to digital preservation before the disaster and the efforts of local networks. Moreover, the widespread participation of volunteers in the restoration of documents damaged by the earthquake and tsunami prompted broader popular engagement with history and has offered new opportunities to rethink the societal value of historical materials. It has also expanded the interdisciplinary possibilities for the field of historical document preservation, drawing attention, for instance, to the role of preservation as a form of psychosocial support after disasters.

Keywords: historical materials, Shiryō network, historical material rescue, citizens and historical materials, disaster aid and historical materials

Introduction

Across the Japanese archipelago, it is estimated that there are over 2 billion extant documents dating from the beginning of the 16th to the middle of the 19th century alone. (Okumura, 2012). The vast majority of these documents are privately owned, and unlike “Designated Cultural Properties,” are not protected by national or local governments. For this reason, in the aftermath of the 1995 Hanshin-Awaji earthquake, as region after region experienced natural disasters, volunteer organizations known as “Shiryō Networks” (Document Preservation Networks) were launched across Japan, working to rescue historical documents impacted by disasters. In Miyagi Prefecture, successive near-field earthquakes in the area surrounding the city of Ishinomaki prompted the start of local Shiryō network activities in July, 2003. Linking with other parts of the country, the organization faced similar problems relating to the preservation of local historical materials as other Shiryō networks. The 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake was the largest-scale natural disaster in the organization’s history. The implementation of historical material rescue and preservation efforts during the 2011 disaster, as well as the problems faced during that process, are the topic of this paper.

1: Damage to Historical Materials During the Great East Japan Earthquake

The massive earthquake that struck on March 11, 2011 triggered a large-scale tsunami off the coast of Japan as well as a major nuclear disaster. Along with the loss of irreplaceable human lives and the devastation of the traditional landscape and appearance of many towns, countless collections of precious historical materials were also destroyed. The total number of lost documents, however, will never be fully known. That is because no basic survey of the whereabouts and number of historical materials was ever conducted before the disaster.

To give just one example of what was lost, in the town of Kitakami, now part of Ishinomaki city, of 15 privately-held collections surveyed from 1999 to 2005, 8 were damaged by the 2011 tsunami, amounting to the loss of around 15,000 documents. Centuries-old manuscripts that recorded the history of this disaster-affected region as well as more recent records of times within the memory of current-day local residents – historical materials with the potential to be of widespread interest and of high value as local public goods – were lost forever without ever seeing the light of day.

2: The Response to the Great East Japan Earthquake

1. The importance of digital photography

Since 2003, the Miyagi Shiryō Network has photographed countless local historical manuscripts with digital cameras, which had started coming into widespread use during the same period. All of the documents lost in the 2011 tsunami in Kitakami, mentioned above, had been digitally photographed beforehand. While the original data held at the local city hall branch was destroyed during the disaster, a separate copy of the data in the possession of those involved in the photographing survived. This surviving data was then copied into microfilm, a more stable medium, and so was able to be “returned” to the owners of the lost documents. With the permission of the owners, some of the recovered data was also donated for use at the recovery and community development (*fukkō machizukuri*) center in Ogatsu, Ishinomaki.

While there are problems with the long-term preservation and readability of computer data, the digital recording of documents, done as a practical expedient prior to the 2011 disaster due to budgetary and staff limitations, prevented the total annihilation of local historical material even with the extremely tragic loss of the original manuscripts.

2. The importance of local cooperation

Due to the work done prior to the 2011 disaster, the whereabouts of many document collections were ascertained. This work also resulted in the formation of a strong network of document owners, local residents, and local governments. That, in turn, enabled the speedy recovery of documents after the disaster had occurred, thanks to the rapid coordination and quick grasp of the post-disaster situation among the relevant parties. Related to this point, local governments or museums and archives that had regularly conducted preservation activities well before the disaster were able to save many documents, while in areas where due to municipal mergers or other reasons, information regarding the location and status of local documents had not been passed on to local governments, effective post-disaster document rescue did not occur.

At the end of the day, the role of experts alone is limited. No matter the shape they take, the formation of relationships within the local community centered around the continued protection of historical materials is decisive in determining the success of document rescue efforts during disasters.

3. The response to the impact of the tsunami

The 2011 disaster resulted in damage to paper records – from historical manuscripts to contemporary government documents – on a scale never before experienced. Along with specialized equipment like vacuum freeze-drying devices, preservation techniques that allowed for the participation of volunteers without specialist knowledge were devised and rapidly introduced in Miyagi Prefecture and other regions affected by the disaster. These methods were also deployed in later disasters struck repeatedly across the Japanese archipelago – like the Kumamoto earthquake in 2016, the floods in western Japan in 2018, and Typhoon Hagibis in 2019. Emergency procedures for the restoration of historical documents as well as more contemporary records of everyday life, like photographs and albums damaged by disaster, were introduced by those with experience from document rescue efforts after the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake. Techniques based on their experience continue to be refined.

3: Issues in the Preservation of Historical Materials After the Great East Japan Earthquake

1. Organizational response to historical document preservation

The Great East Japan Earthquake made it clear that during large-scale natural disasters, the document rescue and recovery response must occur on an equally large scale. During the disaster, the Committee for Salvaging Cultural Properties Affected by Disasters was formed, based at the National Research Institute for Cultural Properties in Tokyo. Made up of local governments and educational commissions in the affected regions as well as groups involved in the arts and cultural properties, the committee combined governmental and specialist expertise to carry out organized relief and preservation efforts. For the preservation of privately-held documents, however, the efforts of governments and specialists alone were far from sufficient.

For this reason, new attention was drawn to the Shiryō Networks. Since the 1995 Hanshin-Awaji earthquake, the networks had been working on a nationwide scale through collaborations between experts and ordinary citizens. Their activities were seen as particularly relevant to the preservation of privately owned documents. At the June, 2014 Science Council of Japan meeting, “Passing down Cultural Properties to the Next Generation – Building Preservation Strategies that Account for Natural Disasters,” the Shiryō Networks were discussed as crucial to the continued preservation of cultural properties for their role in linking both public and private actors. The continued spread of Shiryō Networks, along with the deepening of their cooperation with local governments, academic societies, and other organizations, were deemed essential tasks for the future.

2. The meaning of document rescue and preservation for post-disaster recovery

While local historical materials are invaluable for what they tell us about a given area’s historical culture, most people do not give them much thought on an everyday basis. However,

during the 2011 disaster, many damaged local historical materials were saved because they were seen as local treasures and a source of local identity. The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, adopted at the March 2015 Third United Nations World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction, declared that “it is urgent and critical to anticipate, plan for and reduce disaster risk in order to more effectively protect persons, communities and countries, their livelihoods, health, cultural heritage, socioeconomic assets and ecosystems, and thus strengthen their resilience,” calling for the creation of disaster risk reduction systems that account for the importance of preserving cultural heritage.

Through the rescue of damaged local documents and photographs after the 2011 disaster, individual and societal memory was also saved. Psychologist Ann Masten argues that the “human capacity for resilience...evolved over many generations through the interplay of interacting cultures, families, and individuals” (Masten, 2020). The Great East Japan Earthquake demonstrated the important connection between restoring human and societal memory and resilience.

4: The Future of Historical Material Rescue and Preservation

1. New methods in disaster science – The organization of large-scale networks for document preservation

Today, the most important sites for the organization of document preservation efforts are the nation’s public universities. Many of the Shiryō Networks base their operations at local universities – the Miyagi Shiryō Network, for instance, is located at Tohoku University’s International Research Institute of Disaster Science. For this reason, in March of 2018, Tohoku University, the National Institutes for the Humanities, and Kobe University launched the Project for a Network of Inter-University Research Institutes, involving collaboration between local universities and Shiryō Networks as well as the National Institutes for Cultural Heritage’s Project for the Advancement of a Network for Disaster Risk Reduction for Cultural Properties. With the local-level disaster response for the preservation of historical and cultural materials at its core, this project pursues collaborative research towards the formation of a network for the preservation and use of historical materials. At Tohoku University, with the International Research Institute of Disaster Science’s Document Preservation Research Division as its host, the project is being advanced through the building of collaborative relationships between the Research Institute for Disaster Science, the Faculty of Arts and Letters, and the Center for Academic Resources and Archives.

2. New methods in disaster science – The effects of document preservation on psychosocial support

Even though a decade has passed since the 2011 earthquake, the International Research Institute of Disaster Science’s historical material preservation division continues to do its preservation work in collaboration with the Miyagi Shiryō Network. Alongside these efforts, interdisciplinary research connecting history and psychology has continued to explore the impact of the rescue and preservation of historical material on the recovery of people and areas affected by disaster. Specially-appointed professor at the Institute, Machiko Kamiyama, has conducted a research study on the psychosocial support impact of document rescue and preservation on the owners of document collections affected by the Great East Japan Earthquake (Kamiyama, 2019). More research is needed in the future on how the rescue of historical materials can lead to the psychological recovery of people impacted by disaster.

Conclusion - from the authors

History, to the living, perhaps seems like something distant and long forgotten. However, what became clear during the Great East Japan Earthquake and disaster was that in order to stand back up again after the disaster, this history can become a major source of support for us today. We, in the present, are alive thanks to the support of the past. At the same time, we also have a responsibility to link the past and present into the future. We believe that the rescue of historical materials is one way to fulfill this responsibility.

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