Lecture 3:
Why is the Kyoto Gion Festival Conducted?
- The history and system of the Festival -

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1. Introduction
My name is Yamaji Kozo. I am studying the history of Japanese performing arts through research and the study of folk entertainment all over the country. I was the former director of the Kyoto City History Museum and involved in the compilation of the history of the city of Kyoto. Now I am a representative of the Society of Folkloric Performing Arts and the Japanese Society for the History of the Performing Arts Research.

Today, I would like to talk about why the Kyoto Gion Festival emerged in Kyoto, which has a long history of 1,200 years, why the people in Kyoto needed this festival, and how they made use of this festival in their lives.

I think that reviewing the history of this festival, that is, how the people of the towns of Shimogyo in the city of Kyoto handed down the festival, may give us hints for conserving it.

2. Geographical features of Kyoto

Kyoto is a basin surrounded by mountains on three sides to the north, east, and west. Approximately 1,200 years ago, the planned city of Heiankyo was built according to the methods of city construction in China.

The Kyoto basin is terrain high to the north and low to the south, where many rivers and subsoil water flow from north to the south. The water of those rivers is so clean that you can see even the bottom of the Kamogawa River, which flows through the center of Kyoto, a major city with a population of 1,500,000, and you can catch ayu fish in summer, which only live in clear water. Therefore Kyoto is called the city of Sanshi Suimei meaning “mountains are purple and water is clean.” The football team in Kyoto was named Purple Sanga after the purple mountains and rivers.

The reason why the rivers in Kyoto are clean is that the source of the rivers is near. Therefore, much water is collected in the mountains, which are the source of the rivers due to the long spell of rainy weather in early summer, and as a result, the Kyoto basin often suffers from floods or
subsoil water overflows, which cause significant damage.
And when the city was flooded, plagues spread and many people were killed.

3. History of the Kyoto Gion Festival

3-1. Attitudes of rulers in Heian period (794-1184)
Between the 9th and 14th centuries, emperors and nobles who governed Japan from Kyoto, which was established as the capital, thought that the cause of people’s deaths during the rainy season was the curses of those who died due to being defeated in political contests, and thus they held festivals to calm their souls (called mitama in Japanese honorifics).
One of those festivals was Gion-Goryoe held at the Yasaka Shrine (it was called Gion Shrine before the modern period), which is at the bottom of the Higashiyama Mountains (mountains to the east of Kyoto).
This is a festival that is said to have begun in 869 to soothe the souls, or mitama, enshrined by the Shinto priests of Gion Shrine on the shore of a pond in Shinsenen, which was at the center of Heiankyo, one of several former names for the city of Kyoto as the capital.
On June 7, according to the old-style calendar (July 17 according to the solar calendar), during the rainy season, three floats start from Gion Shrine, parade around Kyoto, and stay at Otabisho, the place where the floats visit and stay in Choju, which is an administrative unit, over seven days. On June 14 according to the old-style calendar (July 24 according to the solar calendar), the three floats parade around Kyoto again and return to Gion Shrine. This festival has been held for 1145 years, and the three floats now visit the shrine called Gokusha, which is erected on the shore of the pond in Shinsenen in the past.
You can see the scenes of Gion-Goryoe in detail on a picture scroll called Nenchu-Gyoji-Emaki, which was drawn at the end of the 12th century.

3-2. Attitudes of city dwellers in the 14th century and later
In the 14th century, the city dwellers of Kyoto became economically stronger. Particularly in the Shimogyo area, many economically powerful bourgeois lived; as many people as before still died of plagues due to the continuous rain during the rainy season every summer, though. Those ordinary people living in Kyoto thought that people would die during the rainy season due to the gods of plagues called Ekijin across the city, not the curses of the souls of people who were defeated in political contests.
In order to exorcise the Ekijingods, they built a beautifully decorated shinza, meaning “seats for the gods,” and pulled them around the city so that Ekijin could gather around them
This is the origin of Yamahoko Junko (the parade of yama and hoko in the Festival).

3-3. City of Kyoto around the 16th century
Most of the city of Kyoto burned due to Onin-no-Ran, the civil war beginning in 1467. After that, Kyoto was gradually reconstructed; however, Kamigyo, where the emperors and shoguns lived, and Shimogyo, which is the town of bourgeois, were clearly separated. Yamahoko Junko is a festival held by the people of Shimogyo.

9. Two features of the Festival
The Kyoto Gion Festival was initiated by conducting the Gion-Goryoe, the festival of three floats moving around the city, which began in the middle of the 9th century, in parallel with Yamahoko Junko, an event that began in the 14th century to exorcise the Ekijin gods.
This time, mainly the event Yamahoko-Junko, which is held by the city people who are living in the narrow area of Shimogyo to exorcise the Ekijin gods that have been thought to cause plagues during the rainy season, was included in Japan’s proposal for inscription in the
Representative List of the ICH of Humanity.

10. **Forms of shinza for the parade**

The shinza was built by the city people to gather Ekishin and to prevent plagues from spreading. At first, the shinza was a tall pole on which a halberd with a sword-shaped glittering tip was mounted, and people moved it around the city. Townspeople in Shimogyo, who were economically rich, exercised ingenuity for building a more beautiful one and came up with four types as follows:

1. The hoko float whose sword-shaped halberd is extremely large and mounted on the roof of the stage with wheels around which beautiful artworks are decorated.
2. The elaborate yama float on a certain theme, with a small hill as part of furnishings called *tsukurimono*, on which a tree stands and before which a scene of a story is shown using figures.
3. The *yatai* float whose shape is the same as yama, decorated only with elaborate figures on a certain theme, without a small hill and a tree.
4. The *kasahoko* float on which a large paper-umbrella whose top is decorated with branches and paper fringes called *gohei* are mounted, around which performing arts called *Hayashimono* are given.

Thus the shinza moving around to gather Ekijin has changed into a variety of different forms; however, what they have in common is that all the floats move to all four corners of the city by being wheeled or pulled by people.

11. **Organizations that supported Yamahoko Junko**

Between the 15th and 16th centuries, more than 50 hoko and yama floats were presented. Each of those floats was basically presented by a community or a town comprising houses on both sides of a street. During the early years of the 16th century, the concept was almost established and thus around 35 towns presented floats.

The communities of towns that presented floats did not bear the total cost of the floats. There was a system called *Yoricho-Seido* or *Yoricho-System*, under which around 250 towns in the Shimogyo area associated with a certain town to present the yama or hoko float and shared the cost and labor. That is, there was a mechanism through which people in Shimogyo would never fail to join the Festival.

Moreover, many craftsmen and carpenters who were involved in *hoko-machi* or *yama-machi* (*machi* meaning “a town”) took charge of specifically assigned jobs or sites, and thus the preparation and parade of the Festival proceeded in a systemic manner.

In recent times, however, the system for involving all the people in Shimogyo in the festival unfortunately broke down.

12. **The festival and the people’s lives in Shimogyo**

The area of Shimogyo, which sponsors the Yamahoko Junko, was developed as an area of commerce and industry earlier than any other area in Kyoto. Particularly on Muromachi-Dori and Shinmachi-Dori, where many towns presenting yama or hoko are concentrated, there were many upscale kimono shops. In addition, Kyoto was supplying not only high-quality kimono but craft products of wood and metal nationwide as its core business, and thus people in other areas were attracted by products that were the “made-in-Kyoto” brand.

The yama and hoko floats parading in the festival are decorated with a wide variety of upscale woven and/or dyed fabrics, metalwork, and woodcarvings made in Kyoto. The purpose of such gorgeous decoration is to gather the evil Ekijin, which send plagues to shinza, i.e. yama and
hoko, and for the people in Shimogyo, at the same time, to display the gorgeous products made in Kyoto.

Thus, the people in Shimogyo advertised the excellence of industries in Kyoto by making use of the festival. Audiences of the festival arriving from many other places realized the excellence of upscale produces made in Kyoto by watching Yamahoko Junko.

Of course, the belief in expelling plagues was the main purpose of this festival; however, since the 14th century, the secondary advantage of advertising the industries in Kyoto is another reason that the townspeople of Shimogyo have continued this festival.

When Kyoto Ceramic Co., Ltd. (now Kyocera), which established a new business in Kyoto, succeeded in the production of synthetic rubies, they embedded it in the eyes of the dragon on the *Ushirogake-maku* tapestry decorating the Minami-Kannon-Yama float which is the rear end of the parade in order to exhibit rubies in the festival.

8. Organizations supporting Yamahoko Junko now

At present, the Yamahoko Junko parade begins from Shijo-Karasuma at nine o’clock on July 17, and a total of 32 Hoko, yama, yatai and kasahoko floats march in the parade. As the Yoricho-Seido system does not exist now, the Kyoto Gion Festival is supported by many organizations and people, including Yamahoko Rengo-kai, governments of Kyoto Prefecture and the city of Kyoto, industries in Kyoto, students, and volunteers. For financial support, various measures are also implemented, such as sales of seat tickets by the tourist agency and sales of goods, such as cakes wrapped in bamboo leaves called chimaki, and amulets by each yama or hoko, etc.