

The meaning of watching the snow shape of rabbit on the mountainside of Azuma-kofuji

-----Just a snow, but it means something-----

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Abstract. There is a mountain named Azuma-kofuji (1,705m) with remained snow shape in Fukushima, Japan. The shape of the remained snow seems like a rabbit, which shows “Snow rabbit” at the time of snow melting yearly. In the region people used to have said, when the rabbit appeared on the mountainside of Azuma-kofuji, it’s a signal for sowing on the fields and the time of the hatching work of silkworms. Because of change to industrialization of filature works the traditional manufacture and the provincial custom vanished in the 1930s. But after the World War II the local newspaper took up the Snow rabbit and began to campaign for the reassessment of local culture and custom of the habitants. It was a steppingstone of reminiscence of the Snow rabbit. What is meaning today the viewing of the remained snow? We see and enjoy now the sign of spring like ancient people did so.

Introduction

Main theme of the Scientific Symposium of ICOMOS, Xi’an 2005, China was “Monuments and sites in their setting – conserving cultural heritage in changing townscapes and landscapes”. I proposed in that symposium the theme “Advocacy of Vista-Heritage ---The Important Role of Viewing to Mountain for Setting in Japan---”. (Akasaka 2005) This theme included partly the main theme of the Scientific Symposium of ICOMOS 2008, because the cultural behavior of the viewing or vista keeping is intangible as long as the mountain exists as something tangible. 2005 I took up three cases of Japan namely Okinawa, Tokyo and Fukushima. The hill Bengatake that is less than 1 km east from the Shuri Castle World Heritage in Okinawa used to have been a place for praying from the Shuri Castle at the time of Ryukyu Kingdom. The vista from Shuri Castle is threatened now because the hill Bengatake is outside of buffer zone of World Heritage. There is a place in Tokyo where we can

see and enjoy the Mt. Fuji even now. The religious meaning seems to be not so strong. But when the vista to Mt. Fuji was threatened by the building of apartments, appeal movement occurred by the inhabitants. In Fukushima there is a mountain named Azuma-kofuji. The remained snow at the mountainside is called by the name of “Snow rabbit”, because the snow shape seems like a rabbit. People at the foot of the mountain used the snow shape as agricultural almanac. They have forgotten it several decades. But the Photo-Campaign as a cultural movement (reevaluation of local life) after the World War II made them to remind the “Snow rabbit”. In this paper I would like to take up the case of Snow rabbit at the mountainside of Azuma-kofuji. The snow shape exists since ancient and the meaning has been changing time to time. The issue of this paper is the transition of the *raison d’être* Snow rabbit.

What does mean “Vista-Heritage”? ---From the theme 2005

As to conserving cultural heritage in changing townscapes and landscapes I advocated the protection of viewing corridor to mountain from town, namely Vista-Heritage as something unchangeable. What we see faraway, i.e. the mountain has meaning. In my report of 2005 I showed the case of the garden Entsuji-temple Kyoto Japan. The garden of Entsuji-temple in Kyoto is well known for the garden of “Shakkei (borrowed scenery)” in Japan, namely we consider a shape of mountain (Hieizan) to be important element of the garden scenery (Figure 1.). In general there is the mountain outside of the garden. Therefore we say it



the garden of Entsuji-temple



Mt. Hiei – the garden – recognizer (me)

“borrowed”. But we can presume the the garden and that mountain through this garden. In other words there is a relation line for the setting, mountain – garden – and me (recognizer) (Figure 2.). In that Shakkei-garden the vista to the mountain is absolutely necessary. The setting is a selected combination of some elements in landscape. If the recognizer would not exist, the garden technique like the

Shakkei would not come into existence. The Mt. Hiei would not stop radiating the religious meaning, as long as somebody would understand it. If nobody could understand and remember it, the mountain would change (or return) to just a mountain and the technique of the Shakkei-garden come not into existence. And the garden would be ruined.

The natural environment of Azuma-kofuji and the remained snow

When the flowers of cherry and peach trees are coming out in spring, the snow of the mountainside melting. Under the different conditions of the vegetation and topography on the mountainside the difference of the speed of the snow melting offers and then some remained snows form something like a picture. The shape of the snow seemed sometimes like a rabbit, horse, farmer, bird, carps etc. (Figure 3.) People who lived in village at the foot of the mountain named them the shape of the snow. Yukigata (remained snow shape), the picture made of the remained snow is moving (melting and disappearing). Therefore the village people used the changing shape as almanac. Namely when e.g. the Snow rabbit appears, they recognized it the time for sowing or planting. Yukigata must be vanished until the early summer it means no permanent snow ravine. Yukigata is one of marks of changing seasons for the habitants, who could see and recognize it. It is the landscape, which would be found not in a mountain but seen from a village at the foot of the mountain. Yukigata is composed of not only the remained snow as a physical existence but also the imagination of the recognizer. The landscape consists of the both elements. If the recognizer having the imagination would disappear, the landscape would become not the landscape itself, although the Yukigata remained physically on the mountainside. (Figure 4.)

The remained snow shape (Yukigata) has been studied almost by the field of folklore. (Iwashina 1968) Recently the theme Yukigata is researched also from the side of the disaster prevention by the surveying the appearance of remained snow. It has been tried by the survey to judge the moving situation of the surface of the earth. (Nouguchi 1995)

There is a mountain named Azuma-kofuji (1,705m) with remained snow shape in Fukushima, Japan. From the end of April to early in May, we can see even now the remained snow with shape like a rabbit. Mt. Azuma-kofuji is the southeast part of the National Park of Bandai-Asahi. The top of the Azuma-kofuji has a crater 500m in diameter and a conic shape. On that mountainside the Snow rabbit appears in the area mainly



Figure 3. Collection of sketched Mountain Emblem (Yukigata) by Tabuchi 1981

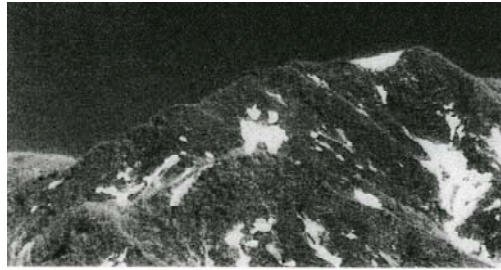


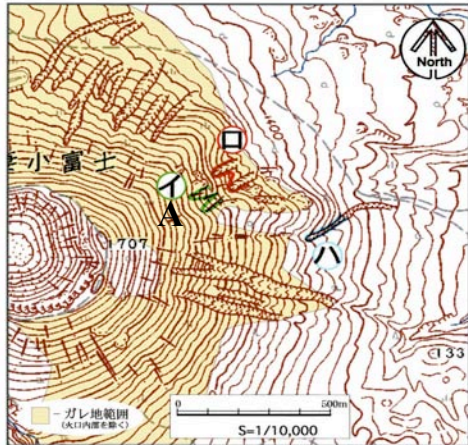
Figure 4. What does it appear? Snow grandpa & grandma! by Saito 1997



Figure 5. The location of Azuma-kofuji



Figure 6.
The appearing point (sketch) of
the Snow rabbit and cirques
positions at the Azuma-kofuji



without forest. Mt. Azuma-kofuji is among high mountains 1900m-2000m whose extent is east and west 20km, north and south 10km (Figure 5).

The site of the Snow rabbit has been researched topographic and the appearing process guessed from landform and climate condition of the surrounding area (Figure 6). The part of rabbit's ears is small cirques (1) in the area 1500m-1540m height. The forefeet and under jaw are next small cirques (□) in the area 1430m-1490m height. The snow is fringed with forest and area without forest. Especially the cirques give some characteristics to the shape of rabbit. (Sakuta, Akasaka 2007)

Oral traditions about Snow rabbit

It is unknown, when people have begun using the snow shape as agricultural almanac. There are only three written literatures until 19th Century that took up the snow shape of Azuma-kofuji: Guisou (Okamura 1740), Sanyouki-Sanyounokoto (Fujiya 1812), Yousan-Nikki (Ono 1893). Guisou written by Yorimichi OKAMURA, who traveled from Edo to Sendai at that time and described the snow shape of Azuma-kofuji in his document. The other two were written by farmers of sericulture in this region. Except written literatures there are many oral traditions about the snow shape (Snow rabbit) and sayings for not only sericulture but also agriculture. (Figure 7.)

Kunio Yanagita, Folklorist (1875-1962), wrote about the sayings as

following. “The saying is something native and used by the people of the region. It played very important role as educational means at that time.” (Yanagita 1990) The most well known saying of the snow shape of Azuma-kofuji is: When Snow rabbit appears on the mountainside of Azuma-kofuji, let us start sowing. Snow rabbit has been called sometimes “sowing rabbit” too. This sort of sayings on the snow shape of Azuma-kofuji in municipal archives of this region are as following. “When sowing rabbit appears on the mountainside of Azuma-kofuji, we can spread seeds rice nursery. (Fukushima City)”, “When the remained snow forms into shape of rabbit, let us start sowing. (Koori Town)”, “When Snow rabbit appears, no worry about late frost. (Fukushima City, Yanagawa Town, Koori Town)” The old tale of sowing rabbit related with the legend of praying for rain was recorded 1936. (Watari et. al 1936) The outline of the tale is following: The saved rabbit repays a obligation and it becomes Snow rabbit of Azuma-kofuji and then gives water to village people in spring. In this village there is a name of place “Usagi-ta (rabbit rice field)” with rich spring water. As to the name of place Usagi-ta there are 17 places with the name of Usagi-ta



Figure 8. Rabbit figures as charm (left) and the votive picture for sericulture in the region where we can see the Snow rabbit at Azuma-kofuji in northern part of Fukushima Prefecture.

According to the 8th Century written document, the high quality and technique of sericulture in this region was so famous, that people from different countries came to learn the sericulture. And the explosive prosperity of the sericulture began at the Edo period. As to increasing the domestic demand, the work-process of sericulture of each farmhouse was divided for efficiency of product. 1773 the Edo-Regime gave villages of this region the privilege on the sericulture. (Ohishi 1999) In the “Tsukino-miya jinja (moon shrine)” of this region rabbit is enshrined. The rabbit is a charm of this region (Figure 8.). The custom of rabbit-charms in this region went out in the 1930s.

Contemporary meaning of the Snow rabbit of Azuma-kofuji

The traditional technique of sericulture of this region was changed and declined through the modernization for high-volume product. Craft factory changed to mechanized factory. The breed and breeding of silkworms was primarily diverse as to different qualities. The breeds were demanded only for mechanized production. The method of the scientific hybrid was established at the mid of Taisho-period (1917). The number of the breed decreased from 254 (1917) to 41 (1934). Namely the type of production that depends totally on nature changed into the type that depends almost not on nature. Thus through the modernization the way of thought on nature of Japanese has been changed. We categorize today something scientific or unscientific, useful or useless, rational or irrational. The Snow rabbit became already irrational, useless and unscientific, because the people trusted science and preferred weather forecast in modern times. The almanac of the Snow rabbit would be assumed as a superstition.

In fact the Snow rabbit was almost forgotten during more than the half century. Since 1980s the Snow rabbit “sowing rabbit” is reevaluated for the regional identity. Before the World War II there were no photos and articles about the Snow rabbit in mass media like newspaper. After the World War II the new photograph movement occurred by the photographer Ken DOMON, which gave influence upon the same generation. 1950s was an era of “Photo-Reportage”. In that time they believed simply in the effect of the newspaper photograph like the American journal “Life”. They were moved by a sense of mission, that

they should face society, record the events and report them people. (Hasegawa 1995) In the local newspaper of this region, “Fukushima Mimpo” (1893-2000) we can find, that the photo or article about the Snow rabbit 5 times 1950s and 12 times 1960s appeared. (TABLE 1.) There is no direct mention of the influence “Photo-Reportage” in the newspaper Fukushima Mimpo. But we can perceive the current of that time.

TABLE 1.

The appearing number of photos and articles about the Snow rabbit of each decade 1890-2000 in the newspaper FUKUSHIMA SHIMPO

y.	1890	1900	1910	1920	1930	1940	1950	1960	1970	1980	90/00
No.	0	0	0	0	0	1	5	12	14	16	26

And how is reported about the Snow rabbit nowadays in the newspaper? It is reported yearly as a messenger of spring: “Snow rabbit appears, spring has come!” What is the relationship between the Snow rabbit and inhabitants at foot of the mountain? We can find it on the official traffic indicator that was built 1988 by Fukushima Prefecture. (Figure 9.) It used to be rare, that the Snow rabbit was introduced into the official indicator. The insoluble Snow rabbit on the indicator would be very effective to fix the imagination of the real Snow melting rabbit. The youth members of the Chamber of Commerce Fukushima tried to give eyes (50m x 21m made of plastic, orange) to the Snow rabbit as advertisement of tourism in Fukushima 1991. (Asahi Simbun 1991 4/19) The project aroused much controversy. This area is in the National Park. The groups for nature conservation Azuma Rempo mountain range, National Park Service and Fukushima Prefecture opposed the project. Finally it has been not realized. The tourism division of Fukushima City invited to enter contest of popular character for tourism advertisement in Fukushima 1997. There were ca. 17000 applicants in all Japan. The selected character was named “Momorin” whose shape similar to rabbit.

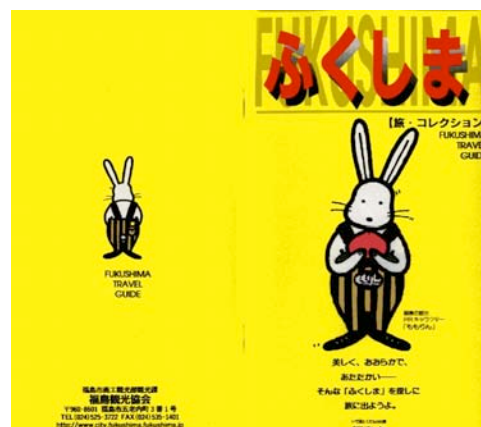


Figure 9. Azuma-kofuji with Snow rabbit Figure 10 When did you change.

(Figure 10.) Momo means peach in Japanese as main product of this region. The Snow rabbit has been coming down from the Azuma-kufuji and today is selling peaches. Thus the contemporary people accept the Snow rabbit with different recognitions of the people who lived in the time of the almanac. But important is to sustain the real existence of the Snow rabbit. We can see and recognize it as natural phenomenon, like the ancient people did, as long as the Snow rabbit appears yearly and in our mind too.

Conclusion

The snow shapes could keep the meaning, as long as the people could read and recognize them. The Snow rabbit is just a snow. The role as the almanac has gone and the people have forgotten. It had the time of indifference and neglect. And then the local newspaper took up the Snow rabbit and began to campaign for the reassessment of local culture and custom of the habitants. It was a steppingstone of reminiscence of the Snow rabbit.

The today's roles of many monuments are nowadays over in a sense of retirement. Significant is not only the existence of monument itself but also the meaning of today's social existence. The issue should be a relation between monuments and the significance, monuments and the social interest or "things and meanings". The direction of the modern science had tendency toward separation things and meanings. The tendency refers to separation of tangible and intangible something like, spirit stays spirit, place stays place. People used to try to exterminate anything superstitious, unscientific and irrational in modern times. It was the time of struggle and feuding on such a sense of value. It is surely not small what we have gained by the modern science and but also what we have lost. However if we would make too much of something only spiritual, we would get the other problems. We should remember the history of the time of struggle and feuding and also not forget irrational world where the monster or chimera of ultra-romanticism used to infest in the past time. It is not necessary to deny the feelings of enjoy the nature included by human beings unsolved questions. The generation process of the Snow rabbit is theoretically very simple. But practically the result of the generation is filled with quite accidental condition. The Snow rabbit is one of the seasonal expressions within local area. The feeling has a similarity to expecting of cherry blossoms as well as Snow rabbit, which is time-and area-limited. It's the feeling of loving and enjoying of natural phenomenon, which is caused by the revolution of the

earth around the sun.

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