

Thoughts on the Significance and Role of the Volunteer Fire Corps as the Core of Community Disaster Prevention
– From the History of the Volunteer Fire Corps –

Tadanori Takizawa, Specially Appointed Professor, Graduate School of Political Science and Economics, Meiji University



Three years ago, the Japan Firefighters Association compiled and issued “The 120-year History of the Volunteer Fire Corps” prior to the “Convention for the 120th anniversary of the volunteer fire corps and the 65th anniversary of municipal fire services.” Fortunately, I happened to have the opportunity to be involved in this book, when I rediscovered the fact that the volunteer fire corps will always remain invaluable and important, even as time goes on and society changes, supported by members who carry out dedicated activities with love for their own local community and the noble spirit of “giyu” or loyalty and courage. I hope my writing can be of some help in creating more opportunities for people to learn about this.



From “Struggle of the Volunteer Fire Corps – The 3.11 Great East Japan Earthquake –” (edited by the Japan Firefighters Association)

1. The Great East Japan Earthquake and volunteer fire corps activities

Although five years have passed since the Great East Japan Earthquake, which resulted in the greatest, widespread and most complex of disasters, a major tsunami and the Fukushima nuclear accident, people will never be able to forget the unprecedented, immense damage it brought.

We have to hand down the valuable experience and lessons learned from the Earthquake to subsequent generations, improve and enhance our fire and disaster prevention systems, and create and hand down to subsequent generations a resilient society and community.

In the Great East Japan Earthquake, the fire service, the police, the Japan Coast Guard, the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) and others carried out dedicated activities. Among them, the firefighters and the many volunteer fire corps members above all continued their activities such as closing the floodgates of seawalls and guiding residents to evacuation areas in the face of the arriving tsunami and the impending danger of losing their precious lives. This is so regrettable and heartbreaking. It is also said that a large number of volunteer fire corps members devoted themselves to firefighting, searching for missing persons, responding to evacuation centers, etc. without sleep or rest for days and days, under serious situations where they had lost persons close to them including family members and

colleagues, or had persons close to them who were missing, and their homes were washed out or they were victims themselves.

Even if disaster response is the duty of the volunteer fire corps and its members are part-time special government service workers, why should those members with another job for their livelihood risk their lives and take on this self-sacrificing behavior? Most of the general public living in these modern times, when overly selfish individualism can be seen in such tendencies as leaving everything to the government or depending on the government, may find their behavior really unbelievable.

The volunteer fire corps greatly contribute to the safety, security and stability of local communities through their wide variety of activities, not only their response to disasters, including fires and floods, but also emergency preparedness training drills during ordinary times, educational activities to raise the awareness of firefighting or disaster prevention in cooperation with women's firefighting clubs, voluntary disaster prevention organizations, etc., the search and rescue of missing persons in non-negligible alpine accidents or water accidents, snow removal after heavy snow and clearing the snow off the roofs of elderly people, and carrying on local traditional events.

2. Love for one's own local community and the spirit of "giyu" or loyalty and courage

Presumably volunteer fire corps have inherited their vocation and spirit of mutual help to protect their local communities, or the love for one's own local community and the noble spirit of "giyu" or loyalty and courage though this might seem a little old-fashioned in modern times. The spirit of giyu means: 1) courage with a strong sense of justice and 2) a spirit of dedication to public welfare, according to Kojien (Japanese dictionary).

Basically, communities should decide their own affairs, defend their own security and create their own necessary organizations while government should support or cover their insufficiencies and inabilities, expanding among municipal, regional and national in order. No other organization or entity than the volunteer fire corps is community-based, helps each other or can exercise disciplined power.

An organization like the volunteer fire corps is indispensable in forming a community, and their love for their own local communities and the spirit of giyu, having been continually inherited in the "machi-bikeshi (town firemen) of Edo," the "shobo-gumi (fire-companies)" since the Meiji era and the "shobo-dan (volunteer fire corps)" from the postwar era up to the present as described in the next section 3, are permanent, not to be lost, even if times change.

— < 消防大精神 > —

天裂地崩不足駭 (てんさけ、ちくずるとも、おどろくにたらず)
猛火洪水何遑巡 (もうか、こうずい、なんぞ、しゅんじゅんせん)
吾等使命在此際 (われら、しめい、このときにより)
任侠一片当挺身 (にんきょう、いっぺん、まさに、みをていすべし)
勇敢沉着亦機敏 (ゆうかん、ちんちゃく、また、きびん)
發揮消防大精神 (はっきせん、しょうぼう、だいせいしん)

Note. The writer Matsuguchi Getsujo (real name: Matsuguchi Eita) wrote and recited Chinese poems.

He was born in Nakagawa Town, Fukuoka, in 1887 and died at the age of 94 in 1981.

He contributed to community healthcare as a practitioner while exercising his versatile talents for Chinese poems, calligraphy, and paintings in the Nanga style. He was famous from early on in the world of shigin, the recitation of Chinese poems, as a writer of many inspirational poems.

In 1994, the Matsuguchi Getsujo Memorial Museum was built in Nakagawa Town.

Incidentally, the meaning of the spirit of volunteerism and the spirit of giyu are not clearly differentiated, and the term shobo-dan tends to be translated as volunteer fire corps. Of course, the role of volunteers is important, and their increasing activity and ubiquity in recent years are most welcome. However, shobo-dan or volunteer fire corps members are not mere volunteers even if they do have an aspect of volunteerism.

Even though they carry out activities for society and people without seeking any reward or return, mere volunteers can just carry out their activities at their own convenience and are able to freely quit these activities. However, volunteer fire corps members are not allowed to do this as long as they are in the role. In some emergencies, they must put off or sacrifice themselves and their family, and take on the behavior of the corps under command even if they are in danger. Their responsibilities and critical role, their various burdens and persistent feelings of tension are far different from those of mere volunteers and are incomparable.

Local people's trust or confidence and sense of security in the volunteer fire corps is still a great thing both now and in the past. Although circumstances were different in the past, it used to be said that "A youth cannot arrive at manhood until he experiences the volunteer fire corps or a youth organization" and "Parents would give their consent to their daughter's marriage to a volunteer fire corps member." These were not "legends" associated with the volunteer fire corps but known facts.

3. Machi-bikeshi of Edo, shobo-gumi, and shobo-dan

In our country, organizational fire fighting started with the samurai firemen (daimyo-hikeshi or daimyo's firemen and jo-bikeshi or firemen under the command of Taishin Hatamoto) and machi-bikeshi or town firemen set up in the Edo period. Jo-bikeshi are regarded as the origin of today's regular fire prevention services and fire stations, and machi-bikeshi are regarded as the origin of today's volunteer fire corps.

In 1718, the eighth Shogun Tokugawa Yoshimune ordered Ooka Echizen, South Magistrate of Edo, to organize machi-bikeshi to cope with fires in the towns. Those who had jobs for a livelihood such as steeplejacks and carpenters came running in the event of a fire, prevented the fire from spreading to uphold their own town's or brigade's honor. They were a familiar entity protecting the towns from fires. Their abilities and their positive customs involving the chivalrous spirit of sacrificing themselves for justice, as well as giyu, were representative of one side of "iki (cool)" Edo. Therefore, machi-bikeshi frequently appeared in color prints, plays and Kabuki, they gained people's trust and became popular. Also in other regions, following Edo, machi-bikeshi were located in castle towns, and kaketsuke-shobo or a joint community run fire service, though not a fire organization, could be found in the settlements and villages.

After the Meiji Restoration, the machi-bikeshi of Edo were reorganized into shobo-gumi or fire-companies. Also in other regions, public or private shobo-gumi (whose names also included hikeshi-gumi, kabo-gumi and suikabo-gumi as well as shobo-gumi) were gradually set up. In order to create a national standard for the shobo-gumi systems and ensure social stability, the Imperial ordinance "Shobo-gumi Kisoku (Fire Company Rules)" was enacted in 1894, and new shobo-gumi, the predecessor of today's shobo-dan or volunteer fire corps, were set up at the municipal level. Later, as of 1926, there were 10,640 shobo-gumi with 1,803,255 members (accounting for approx. 3.4% of the total population; for comparison, volunteer fire corps members currently account for approx. 0.7% of the total population) in 11,573 municipalities of Japan.

Although machi-bikeshi turned into shobo-gumi up to shobo-dan, allowances paid to the members were utterly nominal, and the members needed another job for their livelihood. In addition, all expenses for the operation of machi-bikeshi and kaketsuke-shobo were covered by the towns or local communities. The costs of new shobo-gumi were supposed to be covered as municipal expense (Article 13 of the Shobo-gumi Kisoku). In fact, they were often paid by the local communities. Towns or settlements dealt with the high cost of a fire pump or a fire lookout tower through donations from influential persons and the sales of mountain forests, or by using pay allocated for the members' labor and services as funds.

This way both machi-bikeshi and shobo-gumi were owned and set up by the communities that independently operated them to become the pride of the local residents by guarding the communities. Therefore, their activities were naturally based on their love for their own local community and the spirit of giyu.

In addition, shobo-gumi were integrated with bogo-dan (defense units) out of the need for air defense during the war and became active as keibo-dan (civil defense units) for over 8 years. With the end of the war, in accordance with the Imperial ordinance "Shobo-dan Rei (Volunteer Fire Corps Order)," the keibo-dan were broken up and transformed into shobo-dan or volunteer fire corps (under the jurisdiction of the police). Less than a year later, the Fire and Disaster Management Organization Act was enacted, and the volunteer fire corps were spilt off from the police to become the present volunteer fire corps under the municipal fire service system. Volunteer fire corps have a long history and tradition of 300 years dating back to the time of the

machi-bikeshi of Edo and 120 years since the shobo-gumi were set up in accordance with the Imperial ordinance.

4. Realities of the volunteer fire corps and expectations of the Act on Enhancing and Strengthening Regional Disaster Prevention Capabilities Centered around Volunteer Fire Corps

Now that we have almost achieved the nationwide standardization of fire prevention services, even though the functions and activities of volunteer fire corps vary according to how they cooperate with regular fire prevention services (fire departments and fire stations) and the local circumstances, volunteer fire corps still retain their importance, and are rather of even more importance in today's social circumstances. Their properties of 1) community-based, 2) great mobilization and 3) immediate responsiveness, along with their members carrying out dedicated activities with love for their own local communities and the spirit of giyu are all indispensable when it comes to extensively ensuring the safety and security of communities.

Meanwhile, with the changes in society and the economy, volunteer fire corps are faced with a decline in members, an increase in the proportion of employee members, a rise in average age, etc. With the low birthrate and the transition to a depopulating society, it is also a concern that the volunteer fire corps may be unable to fully perform their activities. Therefore, appropriate measures need to be taken before it is too late, but most of these measures should be taken by the municipalities, residents and communities rather than the volunteer fire corps themselves.

Needless to say, while the times and society have been changing and people's values have become more diversified, it is unreasonable to expect community safety and security against fires and floods by exclusively relying on the government and the fire services. It is important to keep one's own powder dry and contribute to one's local community as a member from the perspective of self-help, mutual help and public help. Without this, even if we unilaterally expect loyal and courageous volunteer fire corps members to perform their noble duties, these volunteer fire corps would reach their limit at some point. Therefore, it is significant for local residents and the community as a whole to first understand the nature and realities of volunteer fire corps better in order to cooperate with them, and to create together with the government an environment in which volunteer fire corps can easily carry out their activities.

The so-called "Act on Enhancing and Strengthening Volunteer Fire Corps, etc.," which was established by lawmaker-initiated legislation in 2013, is innovative and its purpose seems to be precisely this, but the establishment of a law is the Imperial standard as well as just the beginning. It is essential to utilize the law, promote enrollment in volunteer fire corps, and take every possible measure to enhance and strengthen volunteer fire corps activities to put these measures into action.

Particularly if it remains impossible to avoid the situation where only few members are self-employed and have work flexibility while most members are employees and an increasing number of members work outside the jurisdiction, it is crucial for those companies which employ volunteer fire corps members to understand and cooperate in allowing these members to carry out their volunteer fire corps activities comfortably without being affected by their work.

For this purpose, while we should appeal further for corporate social responsibility and community contribution, with the proliferation of the Volunteer Fire Corps Office Symbol System and the expansion of municipalities' support measures for such companies, from a future perspective although a lot of trouble and not at all easy, if required in light of the role of the volunteer fire corps, some consideration or compensation for employee members' main activities, especially for dispatch to the scene of a fire or another disaster during working hours, to both the company and the member should be taken into consideration while considering the examples of ready-reserve self-defense forces.

In the 2016 Kumamoto Earthquakes in Kumamoto, an area which had generally been believed free of major earthquakes, both the foreshock and the main shock registered a maximum seismic intensity of 7, a chain of large aftershocks occurred, and active seismic activity continued, which were unprecedented and wreaked immense damage. I would like to express my sympathy to all the victims of the Earthquake, and my deep respect for the efforts of all persons dedicated to disaster response including firefighters and volunteer fire corps members. I also pray for speedy recovery and reconstruction.