

Japanese People's Awareness of Disaster Prevention

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Abstract: *Japan is a country where various natural disasters such as earthquakes, tsunamis, typhoons, and volcanic eruptions occur frequently. In order to cope with these potential disasters, Japanese people must possess a generally high level of disaster prevention awareness. This paper mainly discusses the formation of disaster prevention awareness among the Japanese, focusing on areas such as the establishment of disaster prevention laws, the enhancement of disaster prevention education, the preparation of daily emergency measures, disaster prevention and mitigation systems, and the high seismic resistance of buildings. It also points out the new challenges Japan faces in terms of disaster prevention.*

Keywords: Natural disasters, Disaster prevention laws, Disaster prevention education, Emergency preparedness.

1. Introduction

Japan is a country frequently hit by natural disasters such as earthquakes, tsunamis, typhoons, and volcanic eruptions. The Great Hanshin Earthquake in 1995 caused 6,434 deaths, while the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011 resulted in 15,897 deaths. Additionally, around 20 typhoons pass through Japan annually, and heavy rains often lead to floods and landslides, causing serious damage to people's lives and economic activities.

Japanese people grow up in an environment where they are told to "make friends with earthquakes," and subconsciously accept earthquakes as part of everyday life. Living with natural disasters has become a unique aspect of Japanese culture. To cope with these potential disasters, it is essential for Japanese people to possess a high level of disaster awareness.

2. Establishment of Disaster Prevention Laws

To create a comprehensive disaster management system, Japan has developed a well-structured legal framework covering prevention, emergency response, recovery, and reconstruction, clearly defining the responsibilities of the central government and local public bodies. In 1947, Japan enacted its first Disaster Relief Act. This was followed by the Disaster Countermeasures Basic Act in 1961, the Act on Special Financial Support to Deal with Extremely Severe Disasters in 1962, the Act on Special Measures for Large-scale Earthquakes in 1978, the Act on Support for Livelihood Recovery of Disaster Victims in 1998, and the Act on Special Measures Concerning Nuclear Disaster Countermeasures in 1999. Currently, there are 22 related laws, which are continuously revised and improved, ensuring a long-term and effective disaster prevention and relief system.

3. Strengthening Disaster Prevention Education

The strong disaster awareness among Japanese people is largely attributed to consistent education and public campaigns. Earthquake museums and disaster learning centers are open to the public free of charge, allowing citizens to experience simulated earthquakes and deepen their disaster preparedness.

Schools regularly conduct evacuation drills and disaster education from an early age, instilling children with the ability to respond to emergencies. Local governments and communities also actively organize disaster drills, especially around the legally designated "Disaster Prevention Day" each year. Across Japan, disaster response exercises are held to educate citizens on emergency countermeasures and raise awareness. From knowing the emergency exits of their buildings to organizing their living space safely, Japanese people are attentive to eliminating hazards and maintaining accessible escape routes. Community cooperation is also fostered during these drills, strengthening the spirit of mutual assistance.

4. Daily Emergency Preparedness

Japan has made extensive efforts in disaster prevention infrastructure and emergency readiness. For example, evacuation shelters are equipped with supplies to support people during emergencies. In Japanese households, measures such as securing furniture to walls using L-shaped brackets are common — about 90% of heavy furniture is fixed to prevent it from becoming dangerous during earthquakes. Many homes also keep emergency kits that include essentials such as drinking water, adhesive bandages, hemostatic gauze, thermometers, painkillers, flashlights, whistles, gloves, raincoats, glow sticks, and even portable toilets. These kits are kept within easy reach, ensuring self-sufficiency during the critical 72 hours after a disaster. Such preparations significantly improve individuals' ability to survive disasters, and the concept of "self-help" is deeply ingrained in Japanese society.

5. Disaster Response Systems

In 1978, the Japanese government enacted the Act on Special Measures for Large-scale Earthquakes, which allows for a "warning declaration" to be issued two to three days before a predicted earthquake, triggering full-scale evacuation and rescue efforts. Furthermore, the government reorganized the Central Disaster Management Council and established an integrated information and emergency response system from the national to the local level. These efforts ensure swift and effective disaster response.

Today, mobile phones are equipped with early earthquake warning systems that provide alerts 10 to several seconds

before a quake hits, offering critical time to react. The widespread use of emergency apps and alert systems on smartphones has also improved people's responsiveness and preparedness.

6. High Earthquake Resistance in Buildings

Japanese law requires that newly constructed buildings be earthquake-resistant, and many incorporate advanced seismic isolation or damping technologies. Earthquake resistance levels vary by building type and purpose, but the standard is that residences must withstand earthquakes of magnitude 6 to 7 without collapsing, and high-rise or public buildings must endure magnitude 7 to 8 or higher. These standards are based on the 1981 revision of the Building Standards Act, and are achieved through a combination of seismic resistance, vibration control, and base isolation technologies. All buildings constructed after 1981 must comply with these new standards. In terms of infrastructure, disaster prevention projects such as the improvement of evacuation shelters and the construction of seawalls are also continuously being advanced.

7. New Challenges in Disaster Prevention

Currently, improving the accuracy of disaster prediction is one of the new challenges Japan faces in disaster prevention. Some experts have pointed out that although Japan has established a relatively comprehensive disaster response system, it remains insufficient when dealing with even larger-scale natural disasters. How to further enhance the legal framework and administrative systems for disaster response, as well as strengthen the country's financial capacity for disaster relief, are major issues the Japanese government must address in the future. In addition, improving support systems for vulnerable groups who may have difficulty accessing disaster information—such as the elderly and foreigners—is also an important and emerging concern.

8. Conclusion

In summary, Japanese people's awareness of disaster prevention has gradually developed under the historical and geographical context of frequent natural disasters. This awareness is deeply embedded in their daily lives, forming a multi-layered response system that spans individuals, communities, and the entire nation. Moving forward, in addition to further raising disaster awareness, it will be essential to implement more inclusive disaster prevention measures to ensure the safety and well-being of people from diverse backgrounds.

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