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Women Left Behind After Workplace Accidents: Legend of Human Pillar and Safety Campaign

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses, from a historical point of view, two cases of workplace accidents, that is, a history of Nagara bridge and a history of safety campaigns, which happened in Japan respectively in the Middle Ages and in the 1910s in making a comparison with one another and reveals that unexpected accidents generated sorrowful memories among those who were beside accident victims and the memories embedded in their minds transformed their sorrows into a legend of human pillar on one hand and safety campaigns on the other hand by focusing on a close relation between memory and history on the basis of a concept coined by French historian Pierre Nora, lieux de mémoire. The first case that we examine here belongs to a well-known legend of a victim who was widely supposed to sacrifice himself as a human pillar when constructing a bridge. We argue that it is not a human pillar but an 'occupational' accident that caused his death, based on a more convincing explanation of the event given by Japanese folklorist Itsuo Wakao who acutely appoints out that the victim was not killed as a human pillar but in an accident. We share his view in this point. In the second case, we consider nationwide safety campaigns that Toshibumi Gamo organised and conducted in the 1910s in order to show that a worker's death promoted him to launch safety campaigns at work. Each case has a twofold aspect that is common to both of the cases that we discuss in this paper: a structural similarity and a duality of victims. The former refers to a relation between memory and history in Nora's sense of the terms, showing that a sorrowful memory associated with a human pillar embedded in a legend dedicated to the victim or with a worker's death symbolised in a green cross of the safety flag is a main source to promote today's safety awareness, whereas a history of each case about the Nagara bridge or safety campaigns has its own way to illustrate what really happened in the eyes of everyone but does not belong to no one. In such a relation between memory and hisotry, we are always invited to "the eternal present" of the event that happened in the past in the sense that memory is always living not in the midst of history but in their memory. The latter means that victims are not always those who were killed by workplace accidents. In fact, a worker's death has an extraordinary impact upon his family not only in the daily life but also in their own mind. Therefore, we should not overlook that it is often women, daughter or wife more or less with her babies or young children, who were left behind after occupational accidents had unexpectedly happened. Safety awareness aims to save primarily accident victims and secondarily victims' families. To keep workers safe is, once upon a time or even now, to keep family smile.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to recall the past in focusing attention on two cases related to occupational accidents which happened in Japan and to reveal that workplace accidents have often brought not only a fatality to workers but also a deep sorrow as well as a desperate circumstance in everyday life to women who were left behind soon after her husband's or father's death.

For this purpose, we will examine, on one hand, a widespread legend of human pillar and, on the other, a green cross of the safety flag, pervasive symbol of safety in Japan, which is often hoisted in the workplace. It seems that, at first glance, there is no relation between the two, but, if the legend were a story about a real life telling workplace accidents, there would be no difference between the two cases. As we see below, one can safely state that a man who was supposed to be sacrificed himself as human pillar was killed by an 'occupational' accident when constructing a bridge.

By comparing these two cases with one another, we will give a historical explanation to something commonly found in both of the cases. To explain historical meanings on a legend of human pillar and a

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green cross of safety flag, we refer to a concept *lieux de memoire* (sites of memory), highlighted by a series of books *Les Lieux de Mémoire*, which were published under the direction of Pierre Nora.

The paper is composed of three parts.

Our first concern is to consider how to understand a legend of human pillar in taking for example the most well-known story of *Kiji Nawate*. Much words have been spent on such a horrible tale, whereas few words on what the legend would like to say and what it means symbolically. We will give the following answer to these questions by casting a new light on this legend: it is not a human pillar but an 'occupational' accident that happened when constructing a bridge and caused a man's death. We suppose that this accident was too tragic to be true so that people committed to memory what happened as if a man had sacrificed himself as a human pillar.

Second, looking back to a historical background of safety campaigns in prewar Japan, we would like to show that, knowing that a miserable death of a worker gave birth to safety campaigns that were accompanied with a safety symbol of a green cross, this cross has two different aspects as follows: 1) a practical aspect concerning a safety awareness on the job to keep workers safe, and 2) a historical aspect associated with a memory for victims who were killed by accidents in the workplace. However, the latter has been often neglected. We may say that the second aspect of green cross is, as it were, an 'icon' for victims who died at work.

Finally, as comparing two cases above, we will conclude that a human pillar and a green cross have the same structure of the story as far as the twin elements of *history* and *memory* are concerned. We do not know exactly what happened historically as to these two cases, but still, it is true to say that a human pillar and a green cross respectively have its own memory which anchors itself in the *lieux de memoire*, although each of memories lives on only inside the minds of the group it binds. We need frequently to remind ourselves that there have been often women who left behind after worker's deaths at work.

As a beginning, we will examine a legend of human pillar before considering safety campaigns which began in the 1910s and are hold today.

1. Human Pillar: the Middle Ages:

Legends on human sacrifices have been widespread worldwide. However, it seems that, as to human pillars, which are called *Hitobashira* in Japanese, these are found much more in Japan than elsewhere. This being the case, our aim is not to verify how many stories of human pillars are observed through Japanese history nor to reveal the fact that human pillars were practiced *de facto* in Japan, but to show how a story of these legends can be explained in relation with a matter of occupational safety and health.

Human pillar, which means a human sacrifice buried alive near construction sites by means of which people in the Middle Ages believed that buildings like bridges, castles, shrines etc. would not be destroyed by natural disasters. The prevalence of such legends is seen not only in the Middle Ages but also even nowadays.

Among these legends, there is a well-known story of *Kiji Nawate* (Nihon Meisho Zue Kankokai 1919: 59-66), which means a path of pheasant. This is a story on human sacrifice to be buried alive at the foot of a bridge pillar to ensure its building across the *Nagara* river (1) against floods. And, we find some variants of *Kiji Nawate* such as *Gensuke Bashira* (2), a story about another human pillar of a man named *Gensuke* in a different river, and *Hashi Hime* (3), a story about another human pillar of a princess in the same river. These are more or less different from *Kiji Nawate*, but all variants can be identified with the latter except the place or the victim.

This story, which has been told from generation to generation, as Jay Rubin says, inspired *Noh* plays (4) in the Middle Ages, so that a *Noh* play of *Nagara* has been performed since ever. In this play, "the spirit of the sacrificial victim returns to seek vengeance for his unjust death" (Rubin 2006: 241). Furthermore, it also revives in contemporary literature by Ryunosuke Akutagawa (1892-1927), brilliant writer in the prewar Japan, who published a short essay *Jigokuhen* in 1918, entitled in English *Hell Screen*, in which he mentioned a human pillar of *Nagara* river (Keene 1974: 307). It can be said that such a popularity shows that these pieces of art are a kind of incarnation of the victim.

Let us be back to *Kiji Nawate*. An official document mentioning a bridge across the *Nagara* river at that time points out that it was built in no later than the 9th century. This document recorded in the 22nd volume of *Nihon Koki* demonstrates as follows: "Nagara bridge was built on the 3rd June in 812" (Kuroita 1934: 114). No further information is given, but an illustration of the river, which was drown by Hanzan Matsukawa (1818-1882), tells us a rough landscape about the river (Akatsuki 1976: 410-411). This illustration which he depicted in the 19th century could not exactly represent what the river had been like in the 9th century, but still, it might give us information on what the river used to be at that time. As it shows, the river seems to have been too broad and too deep for boats to easily pass through. A great flow of water would prevent from crossing safely the river by boat, so that it is no doubt that it happened sometimes accidents which made lives lost. That can be why a bridge was needed instead of a boat. A technological level of civil engineering, needless to say, was not enough to construct a bridge as well as to maintain a fragile structure of the bridge.

It is helpful for better understanding why people in those days practiced human pillars that there was a

form of belief which they shared with each other in the Middle Ages. They lived in a world where they believed that it was due to the wrath of Gods (5) that a bridge was often collapsed. And, the main point of difference in belief between them and us consists in the existence or non-existence of god(s) who governs or govern our world. They lived with Gods, so that they saw their everyday life through their view of Gods. According to their vision, their practice of human pillars would not be curious, because they thought that human sacrifices would allow furious Gods to appease their wrath, even though the fact is that their poor knowledge on natural sciences and unskilled civil engineering caused such a collapse.

Dedication with human sacrifices offered to their Gods was often connected with constructions of bridges, embankments, castles, temples and other large buildings, for they believed that human sacrifices buried alive could have a kind of supernatural power so as to calm down the wrath of Gods and to escape from disasters. To summarise, human sacrifices were supposed to be essential for constructions of bridges or other buildings which would be damaged any more.

In relation with the legend of human pillar in the *Nagara* river, a monumental stone dedicated to the victim who was supposed to be buried alive when the *Nagara* bridge was constructed is located in Suita City, Osaka, and it stands still in a quiet residential area (6). On the memorial site, the following inscription of verses can be found: "I shall not speak. My father is the sacrifice ("bridge-pillar") to the *Nagara*. Had the pheasant not cried, they would not have killed it" (Hachisuka 1927: 5). And, the story which inspired these verses is based on the following legend:

Once upon a time a bridge was being built over the *Nagara* River and the task proved a difficult one. It was learned that the gods of the river demanded a human sacrifice, but who was to be the victim was not ascertainable. A wise man of the village, named Iwa, suggested that the lot should fall on whosoever crossed the ferry on a certain day with *a tear in his trousers*. On the chosen day people were closely examined at the ferry, and Iwa himself it was who had the torn garment and was therefore condemned to the sacrifice. He had a daughter locally famed for her beauty, who was about to be married to a young man, but on the wedding-day the bridegroom changed his mind, as the lady would not utter a single word, and she was sent back to her home in a palanquin. On the way the cry of a cock-pheasant was heard and a young man shot the bird with an arrow, whereupon the lady composed and recited the following poem… When he heard of this, the young bridegroom relented and brought the lady back to live with him happily ever after (Hachisuka 1927: 5). [My emphasis]

There are many variations of this legend, but the basic story is the same. One of these variations tells us that she was sent back to her home not on the wedding-day but days after their marriage (Nihon Meisho Zue Kankokai 1919: 59). Another does not feature his daughter but his wife who was left behind after his death, and it ends up with her suicide by drowning with her baby in the river (Kishi 1967: 114).

The principal thing that is unchangeable among these variations of the legend is the inevitability of the destiny of a man who offered himself as a living sacrifice. This legend has been widely told up to the present and its monument reminds us of his unreasonable death.

What actually did it occur on this legend? Is it true that he should be a human pillar for a bridge construction? Surprisingly, there is no archeological evidence for any human remains in the foundation of the *Nagara* bridge. It is just a historical mystery. How can this be explained in a scientific manner?

One of the persuasive discussions is that his death was not as a result of victimisation but of an unlucky accident closely related to the bridge construction. This hypothesis is not widely accepted, but partly supported by a folklorist Itsuo Wakao (1907-1944), who showed an innovative interpretation about this point. He explains that, when people constructed the *Nagara* bridge, they did not choose himself as a human pillar but his novel idea, because he gave a well-thought-out idea for a strong bridge enough to hold the structure against floods (Wakao 1980: 136). Hence, contrary to what this well-known legend tells, the man was never killed as a human pillar and this story is no longer an awful tragedy.

His argument deserves to be considered for our discussion. He negates clearly not only a man's victimisation but also his death itself. Nevertheless, we are not concerned here with the latter, but our concern is to consider the former. What I wish to show here is the reason why such a grief tale of the legend has been passed down to us for centuries, if he were not sacrificed as a human pillar. A man's death remains uncertain, given that there is no conclusive proof that he was killed whether it was as a human pillar or not.

Let us now return to what Wakao says as to a misunderstanding of his death. As Wakao points out, people chose a man not because he wore a torn trouser *Hakama* but just because he showed them how to build a more sturdy bridge with a completely new method. The term *Hakama* has two different meanings: one for traditional Japanese wide legged trousers and the other, in technical terms, for reinforcing implements for bridge piers (Wakao 1980: 110-111).

Therefore, the most likely explanation for his death may be that, when a bridge was been built, he lost his life not due to his sacrifice as a human pillar but an accident which happened to him in the course of the bridge construction that might pose large risks

to those who worked there. In brief, his death can be explained by an occupational accident. He proposed a new idea of the bridge construction, and his initiative unfortunately resulted in his death. That is why his daughter recited an allegorical poem: "Had the pheasant not cried, they would not have killed it." And, people in those days had compassion for the victim and his daughter who was left behind. People also might keep his death in their memory with such a narrative, that is, an allegorical interpretation of what had happened *de facto*. It cannot be proved that he was killed by an accident, but it seems likely that the tale of human pillar was made up in such a way.

To sum up, the tale is not a fact of what actually happened in this world, but an imagination of what happens in the collective memory. The monument to his death always generates its memory, so that it tied and even ties today people to "the eternal present" (Nora 1989: 8). His death indicates one-time event in the historical perspective, whereas their memory always generates his sacrificial death in a *lieu de mémoire*.

2. Safety Campaigns: 1910s:

The flag of a green cross on a white background, namely *safety flag*, is often seen hoisted on construction sites everywhere in Japan. Although there is neither act nor decree providing that companies should put up a safety flag on the construction site, we can see the flag almost everywhere. The flag is omnipresent, because of a safety campaign which has been carried out since a century ago. It is now regarded as a symbol of safety culture.

It would be fallacious to say that a safety flag itself ensures a safe workplace, but still, safety flag is a barometer to measure how much such an awareness campaign promotes workplace safety. Flag does not establish safety, but workplace campaign does well under a safety flag. The more workplaces are well organised for safety campaigns, the more safety is established there. I will take an example to illustrate this.

As to the annual number of deaths at workplace in Japan, 1,075 occurred in 2009 (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare 2010: 289). However, the number currently is very lower as compared with that of the past in Japan as well as today's average of the world. The worst number of deaths ever recorded at workplace in Japan counts 6,712 in 1961, the worst year in number of deaths (Ministry of Labour 1962: 222), while 351,251 workers were killed by accidents globally in 2001 (ILO 2005: 6). This means that today's workplace of Japan is much safer than the workplace of 1961 and that Japan's workplace hazards are very lower than the global average (7). Given that a national centre for occupational safety and health (Japan Industrial Safety and Health Association, JISHA) was inaugurated in 1964, an important role of this centre for better organising safer workplaces cannot be overemphasised. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that a new design for occupational safety and health was also created at the same time. It is a design combined with safety flag design that has a green cross in it. And, a green cross has always symbolised safe work and workers' well-being since its debut in 1919 (8).

The use of a green cross logo originated with Toshibumi Gamo (1883-1996), one of the precursors of work safety campaigns in the prewar period. Dedicated all his life to build up workplace safety, he pioneered the way to establish safe workplaces and workers' well-being in Japan (Horiguchi 2002).

His commitment to safety campaigns was opened by an accident which had occurred in 1914 (10) at a workplace where he worked as a supervisor and by which he began on his own initiative a safety campaign in the same year: one day an accident happened at factory and a worker was involved in it. His death traumatised Gamo to the heart. As a personnel manager, Gamo was haunted by his deep regret that a worker had been killed by the accident which might be preventable. He did not dismiss compassion from his heart, and shared deep sorrow with the victim's family, knowing that his young wife lost her husband. At that time, there were very few women who lived alone by themselves. Husband's death invited a desperate plight of the family. Wife and children had no means to live a life without husband. Gamo wrote down his feeling about this accident as follows:

The worker foamed at the mouth to death. He got a shock because of electricity flowing from his left hand to the heart. His widow who rushed to the scene of the accident to cling to her dead husband did nothing but cry. Deeply touched by that, I couldn't hold back my tears. My commitment to safety campaigns, as it were, came from such tears. (Gamo 1942: 4)

Gamo regarded a worker's death not as a one-time incident but as a human sacrifice which he had made for the sake of all the other workers. In other words, he transformed a victim into a scapegoat. And, a worker's death and the sorrows of his wife who left behind inspired him to dedicate his entire life to safety campaigns, and he always struggled for establishing work safety at all workplaces until his death in 1966. Consequently, we may say that safety campaigns followed a worker's death, not the inverse.

A prospective mainstream of the age welcomed his commitment to safety campaigns. When the first Safety Week took place in Tokyo, it gave birth to a symbol mark for safety campaigns: green cross logo. For Gamo, this logo represents not only a safety awareness for those who are now working but also a memory for victims who were killed or injured at work.

Although Gamo was not a Christian, this loge was, on one hand, coined in respect for love in

Christianity (Horiguchi 2002: 147), and, on the other hand, its colour was chosen in consideration of the red cross, logo of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), which had already been well-known to the Japanese at that time as a symbol of humanity (11). In this point of view, Gamo, Christianity and ICRC shared a philosophy of humanity with each other: as Gamo says that a cross stands for charity in the West and for well-being in the East (Gamo 1942: 8), a cross symbolised a global spirit of humanity for the Japanese of those days.

Safety campaigns rose in response to socio-cultural changes such as urbanisation, auto-mobilisation and industrialisation, which had distinctly emerged ever since Russo-Japanese War (1904-5). These changes in society produced a socially new idea and attitude that one should give priority to prevention. That had never been seen before. This change of paradigm resulted in a creation of an attitude towards safety awareness to keep people not only from being hurt and killed but also from hurting and killing someone else. The term *safety culture*, which has gained wide acceptance worldwide since the nuclear power plant accident at Chernobyl in 1986, is based on such an attitude which decisively marked the dawn of the era underpinned by the *principle of precaution*.

As mentioned above, the safety flag, or a green cross logo designed on it, has two different aspects of *memory* and *precaution*, but still it is always true that safety campaigns accompanied with safety logo of green cross originated from a worker's death, whereas, contrary to such a historical view of point, safety campaigns have a practical mission to encourage workers to enhance safety in the workplace.

A slight look at the safety flag never tells us a sorrowful story about a worker's death and his wife who was left behind. The flag is widely accepted in society and almost everyone knows well what the green cross flag means, whereas few people know why safety campaigns began with its symbol of the green cross flag. Although the Safety Week (12) takes place each year and the safety campaigns during the week brings a great gift of safety to millions of workers, no one knows who sacrificed his life for workers who work today in their place.

4. Human Pillar and Green Cross:

We have examined two cases above. As comparing a green cross on the safety flag with a human pillar embedded in the monument, we sum up our view as follows.

The *Nagara* bridge reminds people of a man's death. As we have shown above, it is open to question to say that he sacrifices himself as a human pillar. And, the reality of human pillar is an unsettled question. However, his death was replaced by a human pillar in a collective memory of those who had compassion for the victims, that is, him who was killed by an unexpected accident and his daughter who was left behind. Finally, their memory was materialised at the monument as a *lieu de mémoire* (see Table 1).

Table 1:

	The Past	The Present
Event (History)	Man's death	the Nagara Bridge
Memory	Human pillar	Monument dedicated to victims

On the other hand, the present-day safe work has been originally underpinned by a historical event of a worker's death, but almost of us has forgotten this tragedy in spite of his sacrifice for today's safety at work. It is not too far from the truth to say that this tragedy which Gamo had in his own memory is still within a green cross which symbolised his sacrificial death. And, this lost memory is incarnated in the safety flag that we see everywhere in the workplace.

Today, the Safety Week plays an important role to enhance occupational safety and health for workers and, at the same time, to commemorate without recognition all victims killed by accidents at work. Accidents occurred in the past on one hand, its memory is living as "a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present" (Nora 1989: 8) on the other hand.

In this sense, the logo of green cross is an embodiment of all the victims who were killed at work. This story which had lived on in Gamo's own memory crystallised into the safety flag consisting of a white rectangle with a green cross in the centre.

While many people at that time regarded accidents as inevitable, Gamo convinced of possible preventions of unexpected accidents. Without accepting a worker's death as an inevitable consequence, he fought the good fight to the end to establish safe workplaces everywhere in Japan with advocates of slogan 'Safety First'. This safety slogan was introduced into Japan in the 1910s from the United States of America where a safety campaign was in fashion with this slogan. And, under such a slogan which was literally translated into Japanese as 'Anzen Dai-ichi', Gamo and other activists for safety campaigns had shared a spirit embodied in the slogan as well as in the logo of green cross (Horiguchi 2007: 4).

A nameless worker got the full value for his death through safety campaigns that Gamo had conducted ever since. The safety flag with a green

cross has a dual meanings: a memory for a worker's occupational accident in the past and a today's safety at work established by safety campaigns which followed his death. These are two sides of the same coin. Knowing that a tragic memory abides always in the safety flag with a green cross, it is no exaggeration to say that safety flag provides a safe haven not only to today's workers but also to a nameless worker who came to grief but, as a result, sacrificed himself to save all other workers. We show such an understanding about a green cross and a safety flag as below (see Table 2).

Table 2:

	The Past	The Present
Event (History)	Worker's death	the Safety Week
Memory	Green cross	Safety flag

5. Concluding Remarks:

In closing, I add a few words to sum up what we have examined above. A French historian says about a relation between memory and history that memory is "blind to all but the group it binds" and "absolute", while history "belongs to everyone and to no one", so that history "can only conceive the relative" (Nora 1989: 9).

According to his wording, it follows that a sorrowful memory associated with a human pillar is living in a monument for victims on one hand and a worker's death crystallised in a green cross is embedded in the safety flag hoisted today in the workplace. These memories are blind to all but his daughter and her neighbours it binds or Gamo and his advocates it binds. On the contrary, a history of the *Nagara* bridge or that of the Safety Week belongs to everyone and to no one. Nevertheless, each of them always invites everyone to "the eternal present" through the monument dedicated to the victims or the safety flag which has a green cross on it.

Furthermore, we should not overlook that it is often women, daughter or wife sometimes with her babies or young children, who were left behind after occupational accidents had unexpectedly happened. Most people realise that it is important to reduce accidents in the workplace and to keep workers safe. What is not so widely understood, however, is that it is not only victims at work but also those who left behind at home whom we should keep in mind.

Notes:

1. The *Nagara* river was at that time a tributary the *Yodo* river, which begins at the lake of *Biwa* and flows through Osaka into Osaka bay. Another *Nagara* river which outflows to *Ise* bay is nothing to the former.

2. According to Henri Joly, this story is related to the *Matsue* river, but still, in which the victim is a man who first passed the bridge "without having under his *Hakama* the stiffener known as *Machi"* (Joly n.d.: 94). *Machi* is a type of underclothes to reinforce the *Hakama*, traditional Japanese trousers similar to skirt.

3. This is a nationwide story which is connected, on the one hand, with a bridge of the *Nagara* river, and on the other, with that of other rivers. An astonishing thing about this story is that it is not only a man but also a woman, his wife or daughter, who were sacrificed together, so that she is supposed to be a goddess of the bridge. See, for example, *Shinto Shu* (Kishi 1967: 113-115).

4. *Noh*, or also *Nogaku*, is a traditional form of Japanese theatre. Its origin goes back to the 14th century.

5. As for the word *Gods*, the plural form means polytheism such as Gods of the river, of the woods, of the mountains, of the earth and so on.

6. It is located at 15 Tarumicho 1-chome, Suita City, Osaka Prefecture, Japan.

7. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) estimates that 351,251 people in the world die for the 2.8 billion work force in 2001, while the annual number of fatal accidents in Japan is estimated to be 2,016 for the 67 million in the same year (ILO 2005: 6, 33). Comparing these two, the fatal accident rate of Japan is more than 4 times lower than that of the world.

8. According to JISHA, "the green cross motif was adopted at the first-ever [National] Safety Week in 1928 as a symbol of safety activities" (JISHA 2010). The fact is that it was already adopted when the first Safety Week was held in 1919 around Tokyo (Horiguchi 2007).

9. Dedicated all his life to build up workplace safety, Toshibumi Gamo began on his own initiative a safety campaign in 1914 which pioneered the way to safe workplace and workers' well-being in Japan (Horiguchi 2002).

10. It was two years before Factory Act would have come into effect in 1916. Factory Act aimed at protecting workers from inhumane treatments and at making their employer compensating workers for occupational accidents.

11. A cross image of humanity had been brought by the Red Cross of Japan founded in 1877 and reorganised in 1886. The Red Cross of Japan was so pervasive at the beginning of the 20th century that it was the largest in the world with 900,000 of membership in 1903 (Checkland 1994: 9).

12. As for the Safety Week, ongoing events are multifarious and take place not only in the workplace but also in the road traffic or elsewhere. What is concerned with in our discussion is the National

Safety Week which was inaugurated in 1928 and which aims to raise awareness of workers, to inspire them to take action in the workplace and to promote life-saving messages during the Week. This Week was initiated in 1919 in the form of a local Safety Week which was held in Tokyo, and the Week has been annually held ever since in the field of "industrial accident prevention" (JISHA 2010: 23).

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