

# Life in the Modern Tokyo Metropolis & Japan's Enduring Fascination with Cherry Blossoms

By Anthony J. LUNA

## Introduction

I think for most people who are (and even for many of those who are not) familiar with Japan, it is no secret that “cherry blossom viewing” is a popular national pastime. But unless you have actually “lived” it, I believe that it can really be difficult to appreciate the degree to which it is deeply a part of the Japanese modern culture. I have lived in Japan more than eight years now, and although each year I feel this way more and more as *sakura* (cherry blossoms) start to bloom, this really struck me this year as I was planning my own event and organizing my schedule to meet with various other friends and colleagues to identify the ideal time to get together for *hanami* (flower or cherry blossom viewing).

Planning a picnic or gathering sounds easy, but it can be challenging to get the timing right amidst busy schedules and fickle weather. Although there are different types of cherry blossoms, in Tokyo, one general type, *somei-yoshino*, that is popularly viewed by the Japanese only blooms for about 10 days! What this means is that if one works during the week, he or she has very limited time during the weekdays or evenings to successfully plan a number of gatherings under the *sakura* trees with family, friends and colleagues in line with popular annual tradition.

One small ... well, not so small ... dilemma is that the cherry blossoms do not themselves announce to the world the specific days they will bloom. Accordingly, we, as many others in Japan do, started our plan by viewing *two* forecasts on the television. One report, of course, forecasts the weather because rain can put a damper on your picnic. But the other reports the “*sakura* front,” or the trend in Japan at that time in which

the cherry blossoms are blooming, and which forecasts when and where the cherry blossoms are *likely* to bloom, which is a far-from-certain endeavor.

With these reports, tentative dates of friends, family and colleagues, blankets, our home-made *bento* (Japanese-style lunch boxes) stuffed with a variety of food and snacks, and persons designated to secure a worthy viewing spot from very early in the morning not to be outdone by multitudes of others targeting the same spot, we were ready for our such gatherings. This year things went well and I managed to participate in several gatherings with friends enjoying good weather. It only rained during one of our picnics, but even then, we had at least a couple of hours to enjoy.

Was it all worth it? Definitely yes. During the few hours one spends under the cherry blossoms with family members, friends and colleagues, time really does almost stop. One has the chance to stop and appreciate the very exquisite and picturesque pink and white flowers, for which Japan is so famous, that vanish almost as soon as they appear, and is reminded (as is evident in many Japanese historical and modern poems and songs regarding *sakura*) that life is fleeting. At the same time these gatherings provide an opportunity for the renewal of relationships with those who are important to you.

## Tokyo – A True Metropolis

According to Japanese government sources, about half of Japan's 127 million people were concentrated in only 14% of the total land area in Japan as of 2006. As a result, the population in this area is extremely dense. Within this area, the Greater Tokyo Area has the highest concentration of Japan's population.

The Greater Tokyo Area (including

Saitama, Kanagawa and Chiba prefectures) holds about 26% of Japan's total population. Central to the area is the “Tokyo Metropolis,” which is a metropolitan “prefecture” made up of administrative bodies, special wards and municipalities, and holds about 12.7 million people in an area of about 2,187 square kilometers. The central area of the Tokyo Metropolis is made up of 23 special ward areas and is concentrated with much of the commercial and business activity of Japan, and is the area I refer to generally as “Tokyo” in this article.

Tokyo has a population of approximately 8.6 million residents in about 621 square kilometers with a population density of 13,913 persons per square kilometer. I repeat ... a population density of 13,913 persons per square kilometer!

The density of Tokyo can be appreciated in a very tangible sense if one were to look out of a window of a large high-rise in Tokyo. You would almost certainly witness a seemingly endless sea of concrete buildings as far as the eye can see. Or one can ride one of the main commuter trains in Tokyo during the rush hour and would likely encounter a number of commuters (with briefcases in hand) frantically squeezing themselves (often with the helping hand of a station employee) into an already impossibly crowded train car as the doors are slamming shut.

## Gourmet Food & Concrete

As many living in Tokyo would attest, being one of the most international and densely populated cities in the world does have its advantages. The Tokyo Metropolis has more than 240 museums, world-class performing theater and arts, luxury stores that compare with those in any other major city, over 3,600 hotels and numerous great restaurants specializ-



Cherry blossom viewing at Ueno Park



Cherry blossoms outside an urban complex in Shinagawa, Tokyo

ing in just about any food. Most recently, Tokyo was awarded 191 stars to 150 restaurants by the famous Michelin Guide, which is more stars than any other city in the world. Furthermore, despite the rush-hour crowds, public transportation is excellent and one does not need a car to get around in Tokyo. Accordingly, Tokyo is a city of great diversity of choice and convenience.

On the other hand, along with the large concentration of people and buildings, for those who live and work in Tokyo, they are faced daily with high food and property prices, long commute times ... and crowds. For the many that commute to Tokyo from neighboring locations, to say the least, the days start very early and end late, and the pace is fast. Along with this, notwithstanding the hundreds of parks and gardens located in Tokyo according to government data and the creative use of greenery throughout the city and in buildings, the sheer number and scale of large concrete buildings in such a compact area can mute any real presence of greenery and open space.

### ■ A Modern Sanctuary

Undoubtedly, one of the principal reasons *hanami* is such an exciting time is that it provides people, particularly in crowded cities like Tokyo, a chance to stop and enjoy the sanctuary of nature and the outdoors to escape the hustle and bustle of everyday urban life. For this and historical reasons extending back hundreds of years, this is an important time for tourism agencies to arrange tours to famous viewing spots and for parks and city governments to organize viewing festivals. Companies and individuals are quick to reserve sites and times for gatherings and parties in desirable locations.

For example, Ueno Park in Tokyo has

over 1,200 cherry trees, which are viewed daily by thousands of people and is the site for numerous group picnics sometimes larger than 20 people each. If you visit during the cherry blossom season, from early in the morning, you will behold masses of people flowing through the park taking pictures with their cameras (and camera phones) and congregating on mats under the trees eating food and typically consuming large amounts of alcohol (which seems to be a socially acceptable and natural part of *hanami*) for time periods as short as a couple of hours or as long as most of the day and/or evening. In addition to the cherry blossoms themselves, there are numerous foods and other products such as *sakura* tea (some offered by the most exclusive hotels), *sakura* potato chips, *sakura* ice cream and *sakura bento* lunch boxes, to name a few, which are released seasonally and amount to big commercial business.

For students, this time period often overlaps with the end of the prior school year and is a time to reflect on the past and prepare for the new school year or the big next step. For companies, often this time signals the end and start of its fiscal year and similarly is a time to reflect and/or celebrate. For visitors, this is a time to visit and see in vivid detail the Japan that is often popularly portrayed by numerous paintings, pictures, postcards and movies. Although my own experience is limited to Tokyo, Japanese television news programs each night show that cherry blossom viewing is a special time for many in Japan for a variety of reasons and is by no means confined to the big cities.

### ■ Back to the Past

The modern phenomenon of cherry blossom viewing is not a recent tradition. It goes back to at least the Heian period

(794-1185) and was a custom in Kyoto which spread to Edo (today's Tokyo) during the Tokugawa Shogunate (1603-1867) as cherry trees were transplanted to the Edo region. Early cherry blossom viewing was done as part of a ceremony held at the beginning of planting in which that year's harvest would be forecast based on the conditions of the cherry blossoms, and was also practiced principally by the nobility and upper classes. Cherry blossoms later would become symbols of both Buddhism and the *samurai* class. Since about 1688, cherry blossom viewing parties spread to the general population and has endured to the present.

Japanese history is rich with woodblock carvings, paintings, poems and other evidence recording the long tradition of cherry blossom viewing. Today, one can also find numerous pop songs and contemporary art dedicated to the cherry blossom. As a testament to the importance of the cherry blossom in Japanese society, the blossom is even engraved on the 100 yen coin.

### ■ An Enduring Custom

While the times have changed remarkably from the Heian period of over 1,000 years ago, cherry blossom viewing is an enduring custom today in Japanese society. Given the fast pace of modern life in the 24-hour Internet age, particularly for crowded cities such as Tokyo where one has little opportunity to experience nature on this scale in one's daily life, it seems that the phenomenon of cherry blossom viewing is a necessary sanctuary for the modern Japanese and is unlikely to end soon. **JS**

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