

Young People Introducing Japanese Culture

By Japan *SPOTLIGHT* Editorial Section

In this issue *Japan SPOTLIGHT* includes a special feature on “Young People Introducing Japanese Culture”. The aim of this idea is to give our non-Japanese readers an impression of how Japanese culture is reflected in the lives of the younger generation. We especially hope that young readers abroad will develop an interest in Japan by perceiving how young Japanese love and respect their own culture.

For this feature, three articles on different topics were contributed by Japanese university students who are taking part in seminars given by Prof. Mukesh Williams, one of the regular contributors to *Japan SPOTLIGHT*.

The first article on a traditional Japanese home food is by Ms. Emi Tazunegi, an undergraduate at Soka University who has been working on presenting Japan to the Anglo-American world.

Ms. Yumina Toyofuku, an undergraduate of Keio-SFC, conveys the vitality of one of the most popular downtown areas in Tokyo which is now undergoing a transition. Ms. Toyofuku attends an English project presentation class — “Presenting Asia to the World” — where she studies about economic development, political leadership, demography and town planning in Japan, India and China.

As a doctoral student at Keio-SFC, Ms. Ui Teramoto is working on Indian migrant network patterns and the India-Japan partnership. In her essay she attempts to convey the charm of Japanese kimono, her interest in which springs from her affection for Japanese aesthetics and the works of eminent novelist Junichiro Tanizaki.



We hope you enjoy these articles.



Onigiri:

Traditional Japanese “Home Food”

By Emi Tazunegi



Author Emi Tazunegi

An *onigiri*, or rice ball, is a traditional Japanese “home food”. It’s a simple, tasty and nourishing snack, usually made by hand. It represents a mother’s love and concern for the children and family. It was originally a common home-made food, not something people would buy outside, and for many it brings back memories of their mother and the warm feelings they had when first eating them.

But because of the pace of modern life, *onigiri* have been transformed into commercial products and can be seen in many stores today. Many companies are now competing to create new *onigiri* items to attract a wider range of customers.

An *onigiri* is a triangular or round-shaped rice ball that contains a filling of some sort, such as *umeboshi* (a pickled Japanese plum), salmon, or tuna, and is often enveloped in a wrap of dried seaweed. Japanese of all ages have loved *onigiri* for a long time, not only because of the delicious balance of the rice with the other ingredients but also because they can be easily carried and preserved. It has always been a favorite food for children, as well as a quick and nutritious snack for busy workers and hungry students. *Onigiri* are symptomatic of the Japanese fondness for rice products.

Onigiri were originally eaten as early as the 3rd century during the Yayoi Era. A carbonized *onigiri* has been unearthed with traces of finger marks on the squeezed rice. The *onigiri* had been wrapped in a leaf and boiled before eating. But the origin of the *onigiri* eaten today was in the 790s during the Heian Era, when rice balls were a portable lunch for soldiers and farmers working in the fields. The same style of *onigiri* using white rice became common for families after World War II, as a lunch for children to take to school or fathers to take to work.

The basic preparation is simple. First, prepare cooked rice, then make your hand wet with water and sprinkle some salt on your palm. Then put a palm-size chunk of rice in your hand and softly squeeze and shape it into a round or triangular shape, being careful not to squeeze the rice too hard. Make a little hole in the center for the filling, which can be basically anything you want. Some of the more common fillings are *umeboshi*, tuna, baked salmon, cod roe, seaweed, grilled meat, and *takana* (a Japanese green mustard). Squeeze softly again to wrap all the ingredients inside, and if you do this well the *onigiri* will be firm on the inside and soft on the outside. Then finally you can wrap the rice ball with dried seaweed and it is

ready to eat.

The numerous convenience stores in Japan offer a variety of food items, but the one item that seems to attract most customers is *onigiri*. Seven Eleven was the first convenience store to sell *onigiri* back in 1976. It was a time when people started to admire the Western lifestyle and no one imagined that *onigiri* would be sold in such stores. People had more interest in bread products then. But the president of the company, Toshifumi Suzuki, strongly believed that *onigiri* would be a hit.

Things did not go well for the first two years. But then Seven Eleven developed a special plastic wrapping for their *onigiri* and made seaweed that did not adhere directly to the rice, enabling the seaweed to maintain its crispness until the plastic wrapper was opened. They continued developing the plastic wrapping to present *onigiri* in the best condition, and also developed a complete automation process. The first *onigiri* sold in convenience stores were all made by hand, which made the taste vary widely and the original cost expensive. The complete automation system made the quality, cost and supply quantity stable. This system is common today but was a groundbreaking idea at that time. Seven Eleven now sells about 1.25 billion *onigiri* per year, about 4 million every day.

Lawson, the leader in the convenience store industry, is adopting another approach and working on a high-quality *onigiri* called



Photo: photolibrary

Onigiri, also known as *nigiri-meshi* or *omusubi*, is a unique Japanese food. The stickiness of cooked Japonica rice enables it to be formed into different shapes.

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“Onigiriya”. It is making *onigiri* using ingredients — seaweed, salt, rice, etc. — that are superior in quality. It is using the Koshihikari brand of rice from Niigata which has a moderate stickiness and maintains its taste even after it gets cold. It is the most popular rice among the Japanese. Some *onigiri* are based on regional tastes using local produce, such as Lawson’s *miso* and sardine from Aomori Prefecture, which costs 240 yen. Another example is amberback fish from Kochi Prefecture which are known for their soft and nutritious meat. With the addition of *yuzu*, another special ingredient from Kochi, it provides a harmony of rich taste. This is also 240 yen. Other ordinary *onigiri* are usually about 100 yen, while the Niigata Koshihikari series sell from 139 yen to 168 yen.

To find out more about people’s views on *onigiri*, I carried out a little survey of 25 people and asked how many *onigiri* they eat per week. Some people eat two or three per week, others as many as 10. The average was 2.5 per week. Because of its perfect harmony with rice, the most popular ingredient was tuna and mayonnaise, with salmon, *ume* (sour plum), cod roe, and seaweed following. Other ingredients such as meat, sesame seeds, curry, and shrimp were mentioned among people’s favorites. *Ume*, in particular, has a bacteria-killing effect which allows the *onigiri* to stay in good condition for a longer time. This is especially good for health during the long hot summer.

On university campuses, too, stores are creating new kinds of *onigiri*. The top-selling *onigiri* in my university was Japanese-style tuna, with an omelet-style and fried-rice style *onigiri* also popular. I saw many students grabbing one or two *onigiri* during the lunch break, before hurrying to their class or finishing up their homework. Eating *onigiri* does not require any utensils, another convenience for busy students.

I also asked about the preferred condition of the seaweed enveloping the rice ball, whether people like it soft or hard (dried). Nine people said they like it hard, eight said they prefer it soft, and one other didn’t want to have seaweed at all. This topic of hard or soft seaweed is a popular one among Japanese *onigiri* fans.

Most of the people had eaten their mother’s home-made *onigiri* when they were children, and it was interesting to hear how many times the word *undokai* (sports event) and *bento* (lunch box) were mentioned. Children never forget the special taste of their own mother’s food.

Some people don’t buy *onigiri* from shops but make them by themselves to save money and time. Some university students said they make simple *onigiri* when they are busy with homework or studying for exams, while others said they do so because they are concerned about food hygiene.

As the world becomes more globalized, building good relations with other countries is essential. For political and economic reasons, foreign relations are not always very good, but by helping to create an attractive image of themselves countries can try to overcome the difficulties of international relations. Promoting its food and cuisine is one way in which Japan can maintain good connections with other nations, and *onigiri* are just one example of a food item with boundless potential.

Throughout history *onigiri* have played an important part in Japanese culture. Although Japan has changed into a busy urban society, *onigiri* have also changed but they remain an important food for the Japanese — a reminder of their mother’s love. **JS**

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Shibuya: The Vanguard of Cultural Trends in Japan

By Yumina Toyofuku

Until recently Shibuya was known as an *avant-garde* culture hub for the young but that image is changing gradually as the area seeks to become a gathering place for people of all ages. One of Tokyo’s 23 wards, Shibuya was once a quiet town for adults. But after the 1970s, as fashion stores began to emerge, the rise of youth culture transformed the town completely. Before the 1970s, Shinjuku was known as the main trendsetting area for young people, but the

development of Shibuya led to a great shift in where to shop for fashion-conscious people. Now in the 21st century, Shibuya is known as a prime source of Japanese fashion and cultural trends, along with Harajuku, the next stop from Shibuya on the Yamanote Line and a mere 10-minute walk away.

A fashion event called the “Shibuya Fashion Festival” has now been held three times, the last one being in March this year. It is a



Author Yumina Toyofuku

festival that anyone can join for free by entering on the Internet. It lasts for about a week and during that period each participating shop, about 250 from both Shibuya and Harajuku, provides special services such as discounts, drinks, nighttime events, etc. The main festival is held in Miyashita Park, where fashion shows, markets, concerts and other events are staged, and the next festival has already been decided for this October.

What is so special about Shibuya and what exactly attracts people to the area? One reason is the numerous fashion stores that offer a large variety of clothes and cater to a wide range of tastes. But in addition to clothes, Shibuya is bursting with restaurants, cafes, and movie theaters, as well as game centers, karaoke, and shops selling electrical appliances. Shoppers will find all they need in Shibuya, and when they have finished shopping they can relax and have fun there.

The most famous stores and buildings are Shibuya Hikarie, Shibuya 109, Tokyu, Shibuya Mark City, Tokyu Hands, Seibu, Loft, Parco, Marui, and Bunkamura. Shibuya Hikarie is the newest building in the area, having just opened in 2012 under the concept of “bringing grown women back to Shibuya”. It houses a theater and exhibition gallery apart from fashion and dining floors.

The symbol of Shibuya, Shibuya 109, was opened in 1979 as a fashion landmark for the young generation and contains about 100 outlets on 10 floors, each shop having its own distinctiveness. The Tokyu department store caters mainly for adults, while the Shibuya Mark City building, located next to the Japan Railways Shibuya station, is aimed mainly at women.

Tokyu Hands, with its slogan “Creative Life Store”, is renowned for its wide range of affordable goods, including interior items, craft works, travel goods, stationery and so on, while the Seibu building is part of a department store chain that features boutiques and other fashion items. Loft, like Tokyu Hands, also deals in common merchandise but is aimed more at young people, and both the shopping complex Parco and Marui deal primarily in casual clothing. Bunkamura (literally meaning “culture village”) consists of a concert hall, a theater, two cinemas, a museum and a few shops and restaurants.

It is easy to see why Shibuya is popular with the younger generations, but it also caters for people of all ages. When your clothes don’t fit you anymore, or perhaps if you want to make yourself look a bit younger, you will have no problem in Shibuya finding exactly what you want to wear for the next stage of your life.

But Shibuya is now facing a serious problem. Due to its firmly established image as an area primarily for young people, the older generation has stopped going to Shibuya. Japan as a country is facing a decline in its birthrate, and as the number of children decreases, so areas like Shibuya will feel the detrimental effect of this. It may even mean the difference between life and death.

To tackle this problem, Shibuya has begun a project to redevelop the area. Hikarie was the first fruit of this redevelopment, and it has now been decided to build another shopping mall under the same



Photo: author

Shibuya, one of the most bustling areas in Tokyo, has always been a source of Japanese youth culture.

name expressly for the older generation to try to lure back more elderly customers.

Another reason why many young people flock to Shibuya is because it is very easy to get there, with many buses and trains providing direct access to the area. It is even easy to get there from neighboring prefectures such as Saitama and Kanagawa.

Shibuya is also known as a tourist spot. Its well-known streets include “Dogenzaka” and “Spain Dori” but the most famous one is “Scramble dori”, a patchwork of pedestrian crossings. The huge numbers of people crossing the roads, usually without bumping into each other, can be an impressive sight and even Japanese visitors from the countryside are surprised by this spectacle.

The most notable landmark near the station is the statue of a dog known as “Chuken Hachiko”. This dog is remembered for his remarkable loyalty to his owner, waiting at the station for his return for many years even after his master’s death. Nearby is a green railway carriage inside which is displayed the history of the Toyoko Line that runs from Shibuya to Yokohama. There is also a statue on the southwest side of the station called Moyai, similar in appearance to the Moai statues on Easter Island.

These three landmarks serve as popular meeting places and are easily found if only because of the large numbers of people standing around them.

There are, of course, more interesting statues and streets with funny shops in Shibuya, so just having a walk in the area is a pleasant way to pass the time. Shibuya is a place that seems to transform itself on a daily basis.

JS

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The Aesthetics of the Japanese Kimono

By Ui Teramoto



Author Ui Teramoto

The Japanese kimono embodies a dynamic interplay of movement and restraint, symbolizing the sophistication of Japanese aesthetics and sensibility. It is the most singular expression of the Japanese mind, expressing both sensuality and poise. It is the oft-told narrative of myth and tradition, a dance of colors and poetry in fabric that has many denouements. Through the ages it has survived both the whirligig of taste and cultural ups and downs. Even during a Western slant during the Meiji restoration the kimono not only survived but continued to occupy a central place in sartorial perfection. It is worn on New Year's Day and at the important life events such as coming-of-age ceremonies, weddings and funerals. The finely woven shades, the combination of different textiles, the symbols of seasons and auspicious patterns in a kimono make it the most endearing garment in Japan. The Japanese kimono represents the beauty of *yugen* and *chowa*, the representation of intangibles and the harmony of the universe.

Interplay of Movement & Restraint

The Japanese kimono works on the interplay of movement and restraint accentuated by the layered shapes of different colored fabric and patterns. Kimono literally means "something to wear" and it has simple rules. The right side of the kimono is folded over the chest to the left and tied with a broad sash called an *obi*. Beneath the kimono undergarments and the *juban*, or outer garments, which have an identical shape to the kimono are worn. This *juban* creates layers of colors slightly visible around the neck and sleeves. Unlike Western cloths, the sleeves of the kimono, *tamoto*, have much wider and longer edges and only from the back is the color of the *juban* revealed. Often a kimono captivates the eye with its beautiful design and external colors, but the beauty of the layers revealed from the *tamoto* and the bottom when walking is another kind. This subtlety in the way colors are hidden and revealed through the layered fabrics is at times unique. Often the ways designs and colors are combined reveal the personality of the wearer. The aesthetics of the kimono often hides a subtle eroticism and weaves a mystery of hidden expectations.

Obviously all is not imagination in the wearing of the kimono. There are certain rules within which a person must operate. The two

most important rules are to do with status, *kaku* (class), and the seasons. Most kimonos are categorized into different *kaku* depending on their materials, colors, dyes and designs and are chosen by the wearer according to the purpose, time and place. For example both the *uchikake* and the *shiromuku* are traditional wedding kimono. The first is often embroidered with gold and silver cranes and pine trees. These symbols express both natural beauty and human longevity. The second also has the same symbols but is usually made from white silk satin. The groom wears a black kimono, a crested *haori* and a grey *hakama* to suit the occasion. Married women wear *kuro tomesode* which is a black *tomesode* kimono with gorgeous designs. The bottom of the kimono is embroidered with gold or silver foil and worn together with a gold or silver *obi*. The *tomesode* kimono are worn by married women and *furusode* kimono by unmarried women, respectively, on important social occasions like weddings. Often these kimono are dyed or embroidered using

Photo: author



Shiromuku, a traditional bridal kimono

Photo: author



Wataboshi (bride's headdress) is worn only with the shiromuku, not with colored wedding kimono. Some wataboshi have a red-colored lining, which makes the bride's complexion seem rosy and fresh.

Apart from important social celebrations, there are kimono for casual daily use. Most people wear cotton, silk and washable polyether kimono. The wearer has the freedom to express her personality within the boundaries of a specified framework and restrictive traditions. Furthermore, the kimono also represents the colors and symbols of the four seasons through its subtle fabric layers and designs. An obeisance to nature and the interdependence of the seasons and society are represented through a subtle interplay of hiding and contrasting. The attempt to hide and contrast expresses both sensuality and poise and is seen as expressive of the Japanese mind. The kimono suggests respect for both society and nature, thereby revealing a symbiotic relationship with the individual.

Superstition & Belief

Since olden times people have worn kimono dyed with plants, as they believed the spirit of the trees would change into kimono and protect them. Japanese dyer and living national treasure Fukumi Shimura has explained the marvel of nature through dyeing. Once she procured cherry trees that were cut in March when powdery snow was still falling. She immediately boiled them and the color obtained was a marvelous light pink, exactly how the cherry blossom petals would be. Later she tried dyeing using cherry trees cut in September, but the color did not become pink. Then she understood that the tree has a yearly cycle of life and the pink color is the representation of its spirit or essence when it flowers. Many people still believe that if a lover takes out the basting thread used in a new kimono then his wish will come true. Perhaps the significance of the basting thread can be gauged by the fact that it is roughly crumpled and kept in the *tamoto*. Perhaps this is an old tradition that has been

forgotten today.

The yugen & chowa of the kimono

The Japanese novelist Junichiro Tanizaki (1886-1965) points out in a brief essay (*In Praise of Shadows*) that *yugen* is central to Japanese aesthetics. The word can be roughly translated as “subtle” or “profound and quiet” but these words do not really represent the rich unfathomable worldview it implies. Just as an expressionless *Noh* mask lead us to sense hundreds of emotions just by changing its angle or just as the notes of the *nogaku* music lead us to explore *ma* or the pose between them, so the kimono also lead us to explore stories from what we see. The selection of colors, design, layers, textiles and combinations of kimono and other accessories symbolizes a world beyond.

The kimono also represents the aesthetics of *chowa* or harmony to stand in the right balance with nature and society. As is well known, the different motifs of the kimono and *obi* sash have to synchronize with the different seasons. Often in spring we wear cherry blossom as the symbol of new life that has just braved the harsh winter and survived. Essayist Itsuko Okabe (1923-2008) once wrote about her failure to wear a black kimono with a five-colored *sakura* pattern for a TV program in the spring. She later watched the program and realized that cherry blossom was blooming at that time. She recalled, “I felt bad about my discourtesy to the real blossoms. ‘*Hana ga kasanarimashita ne*’ (I saw layers of flowers), someone said to me casually. I was glad to have that perceptive comment but it might have been tough if I had been told differently.” Though not strictly prohibited, we often hesitate to wear the seasonal flower motif exactly when the flower is at its best. It is rather worn prior to the season in anticipation of the coming blossom.

Conclusion

The influence of the kimono is both pervasive and universal. The kimono is not only valued by Japanese but also by non-Japanese. In the antique markets of Tokyo there are many foreigners buying kimono. Recently there has been a new attempt by the younger generation to reinvent the kimono-wearing style by mixing its angles and designs with Western-style apparel. It has also had a deep impact not only on modern dress styles in Japan but also on the couture of the West. Smock dresses and bath robes have both been inspired by the different designs of the kimono and the company Gap has created all-in-one-size dresses inspired by the kimono. Though the kimono may have become a somewhat less common garment today, it will not disappear since it embodies Japanese aesthetics and has gone beyond the borders of Japan. JS

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