

# Japanese Traditional Festivals

## – Hinamatsuri and Tango no Sekku –

By Totsuka Takashi

### Hinamatsuri and Tango no Sekku

In Japan when a girl is born, a set of *Hina* dolls are displayed in the home for one month before the *Hinamatsuri*, a festival for girls which takes place on March 3. Traditionally, a set of hina dolls is given by the mother's parents. On the day of the festival, relatives and close friends are invited to celebrate with *ushiojiru* (traditional clam soup), *hina-arare* (colored poprice) and *shiro-zake* (white sake). The *Hinamatsuri* is a symbol of the family's deepest wishes that the girl will grow up healthy and kind, and have a happy marriage and good fortune in her life.

The festival for boys on May 5 is called *Tango no Sekku*. Families with sons display a set of May Dolls, and *Koi-nobori* (carp streamer) are put up outside their homes. Iris leaves are hung under the eaves. In order to eradicate evil, people take a bath with iris leaves; they put devotional offerings of seasonal foods, such as *Kashiwa-mochi* or *Chimaki* (rice cake wrapped with oak or bamboo leaves), on the home altar, and eat the same foods in wishing the boy will grow up healthy and strong.

### Hina Dolls, May Festival Doll, and Carp Streamer

#### 1. Hina Dolls

The origins of the Hina dolls date back to around 1,500 years ago, and the types we have today were developed about 200 years ago in the late Edo period. Every set of Hina dolls contains, at the very least, a set of Emperor and

Empress dolls. Although they resemble the Imperial couple, there is no intention of Emperor worship. Nowadays, there are many families displaying simply these two dolls, but the full complement includes three ladies-in-waiting, five musicians, two chancellors and three court vassals. In total, there are 15 dolls displayed on seven shelves.



A whole set of Hina dolls on seven shelves

#### 2. Boys' Festival Dolls

Between 50 and 100 years ago, the dolls mainly represented brave samurai warriors and the heroes of fairy tales. These days the centerpiece of the May Dolls is the artistic warrior's helmet and armor. At the same time as celebrating the birth of the child, the dolls are displayed in a symbol of hope for his protection, health and success in life.



May dolls' display

#### 3. Carp Streamer – Koi-nobori

The origin of these streamers lies in the traditional Chinese story that says carp swim against the fast flowing Yellow River, to climb up a waterfall called the "Ryumon" where they then become dragons and rise up in the sky. The Japanese idiom, "Toryumon" (climbing up the Ryumon waterfall) derives from this story, meaning to successfully cross a barrier. The flying of the Koi-nobori announces the birth of a boy to heaven, and is a symbol of hope for his protection, healthy and success in life.

### Hina Dolls; an Ambassador for Japan

Sato Yoshiyasu, a former Japanese ambassador to China, contributed the following article in a newspaper on March 3, *Hinamatsuri* day:

When I was working abroad, I used to leave the dolls behind. But I took them to Paris and Beijing. Every year for the last six years, I have displayed the dolls for a month from the beginning of February in the guest room. The dolls have served as excellent diplomats. In Paris, even the highly cultured Parisians declared that they are "gorgeous." My wife has to assist me in answering the many questions. In Beijing, during the third month of the Chinese calendar the peach blossoms begin to bloom like they do in Japan. Even so, there is nothing resembling our *Momo no Sekku*



Kimekomi Hina Dolls

(another name for Hinamatsuri); there is no custom like our Tango no Sekku and no custom of displaying dolls. The Chinese people were amazed at the Hina dolls. One of my fondest memories is that of the wives of some ambassadors in Beijing who had also served as ambassadors to Japan standing mesmerized in front of the shelves where the dolls were displayed. "What a lovely custom!" they declared.

When living abroad one can see more clearly the wonderful things about one's own country. A festival which is held to pray for the healthy upbringing of girls is unique to Japan. Apparently it has a history of thousands of years. In the Edo period, commoners were admonished against the decorations becoming too gaudy, and so simple ones became more fashionable.

The Momo no Sekku and Tango no Sekku, showing the Japanese people's desire for prosperity for their children and grandchildren, is a traditional festival to be proud of. So, hoping that these festivals will continue for a long time for the children's sake, I will drink shiro-zake tonight Cheers!

## ■ Making the Hina Dolls

Hina dolls can be divided into two types – costumed and wooden. Both types are completely hand-made.

### 1. Costumed Dolls

The doll face, *kashira*, is traditionally made of *Tousa*, a mixture of paulownia sawdust and wheat starch, but nowadays they are almost always made of plaster. The body is made of tightly bound straw. The clothes are made from beautiful Kyoto Nishijin woven cloth. The hands and feet are usually made of resin but occasionally carved from wood. Saitama prefecture is the best-known region for producing these dolls, but they are also made in Tokyo, Shizuoka, Kyoto and Fukuoka. There remain about 300 craftsmen in the country.

### 2. Wooden Dolls, *kimekomi*

The body is traditionally made of *Tousa*, but more recently a new, improved material made of paulownia sawdust and resin is used. There are three types of head: tousa, ceramic or plaster. The most common type is dressed in clothes made from Kyoto Nishijin cloth. Iwatsuki in Saitama prefecture and Tokyo are the main producing regions, and there are around 200 craftsmen. Edo Art dolls, *kimekomi*, have been designated as a national traditional craft, and there are around excellent 30 doll makers recognized as national traditional craftsmen. In Iwatsuki, two such craftsmen are registered as intangible prefectural treasures of Saitama.

## ■ Iwatsuki – Town of Dolls and Craftsmen

Iwatsuki is a former castle town, and many pilgrims stopped over in the town on their way to the famous Nikko Toshogu Shrine. The paulownia powder produced in this area is excellent for making dolls. The high quality of water is also extremely good for dissolving *gofun*, the white powder made of crushed shells that is used for painting the dolls. It is said that the craftsmen who worked on the building of the Nikko Toshogu Shrine were impressed by these characteristics and stayed to make dolls. Now, there are about 300 workshops in Iwatsuki, and about 3,000 people are involved in making dolls, which makes Iwatsuki Japan's number one doll-making town.

About 150 years ago, around the time that the black ships of Commodore Perry arrived in Edo bay, there was a lord-doctor of the Iwatsuki clan named Totsuka Ryuken. He made dolls as his hobby, and one day he gave one of them to his feudal lord. The lord praised the doll, and honored the doll maker with the name Togyoku. He became a professional doll maker, and passed the name down to each generation; currently we have the sixth generation of Togyoku.

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