

Kicking up a Storm

Article by Elizabeth Kiritani and illustrations by Kiritani Itsuo

In times past weather in Japan was predicted by kicking off a wooden clog. If the clog landed right side up, good weather was in store; if it landed upside down, rain; or if sideways up, then snow was expected. This whimsical forecasting has been replaced by modern-style weather reports. But despite detailed satellite pictures and calculations from cloud formations and pressure fronts, modern forecasts are often no more successful in discerning the real weather than the flamboyant clog kicking of old.

Golden Week, the holiday season from April 29th through May 5th, this year was one example. The official forecast was for rain in Tokyo on many of the holiday days, but they actually all ended up bright with sunshine. This was a fine break for us, because various shrine festivals featuring azaleas, wisteria and other flowers are celebrated at this time. Tea ceremonies among the azaleas, drumming exhibitions, outdoor Kyogen Theater, and portable shrine carrying went on without a hitch and without so much as a drop of rain.

Due to its location off the Asian mainland, Japan's weather is mercurial. Despite the difficulty of accurately predicting the weather, dial-a-weather reports and a 24-hour TV weather channel have a big audience. And with good reason: floods and typhoons can be life threatening. The length and details of evening TV weather reports, though, never cease to surprise me. They could be edited down to: "it might rain tomorrow, then again it might not." Nevertheless, national and local weather reports are given generous media space.



Ask any Japanese living on the main island of Honshu about the weather and you will be told that Japan has four seasons: spring, summer, fall and winter. Quite amazingly, two of the best seasons are totally ignored. It seems miraculous to me that the "tsuyu", the rainy seasons, get such short shrift. The rainy seasons are distinct and seasonal.

I count six distinct seasons in Japan:

spring, mid-June through July's rainy season, August's summer, followed by another rainy season, and then fall and winter. Most natives here dislike the rainy season. Perhaps the Japanese tendency to ignore the unpleasant and focus on what is positive is the reason why the rainy seasons are skipped over.

The rainy seasons are a respite from the relentless hot weather and provide an ethereal, quiet atmosphere. Also, in

Japan, umbrellas can be special and breathtakingly beautiful. Under a Japanese style bamboo and washi paper umbrella, even the darkest and dreariest of rains seems splendid. A rosy glow from "janome" umbrellas lights up female faces, imbuing them with a soft glow. The larger "bangasa" for men shed a warm yellowish glow. Granted, most of the population here no longer uses these traditional umbrellas, yet even nylon umbrellas are a cheerful sight on a rainy day.

On the day after a rain, damp umbrellas are opened and hung outdoors to dry. At these times, I walk through my Tokyo neighborhood and delight in the giant colorful morning glories hanging from house windows and eaves. It's a very pretty sight recalling the days when all umbrellas were made of bamboo and rice paper, and had to be dried for preservation.

Weather is important in Japan not only as an agricultural nation in terms of when to plant crops, but for high-tech Japan as well. When we enter the rainy season and how long it lasts affects Japanese business. The rainy season marks the time for the sales of umbrellas, air-conditioners, clothing, deep-sea water and special preparations to combat the summer heat. Tourism and energy consumption decrease with the rain.

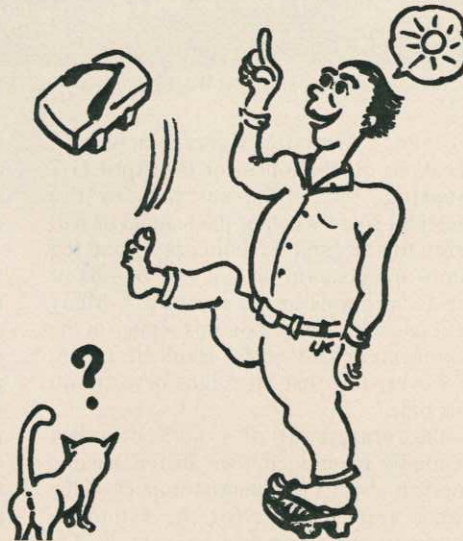
August, following the mid-June through July rainy season, is muggy. Humidity remains so high that it is often not mentioned in weather forecasts. This is a time when one can most appreciate the Japanese customs that have developed to cope with heat. Over the past two millennia, the heavy, humid heat of Japan has inspired ingenious methods of luring one's attention away from the discomfort. Nowadays, with air-conditioning, they are dying out, but some ancient ways still persist even in the largest, most modern of cities.

Various visual methods include oval fish bowls with goldfish gliding within and large blocks of ice set out on tables

to melt. Just looking at them cools us off. The mere sight of summer delicacies such as transparent agar noodles called *tokoroten* and Japanese sweets surrounded in an envelope of transparent gel help cool the senses. Ice, which was carefully stored and preserved for the nobility during the summer months as far back as the Heian period (794-1185), is crushed and covered with syrup - still a favorite. According to an NHK report, ice cream sales increase when temperatures are between 22 and 25 Celsius. Above this, crushed ice and popsicle sales surge.

The whine of cicadas is everywhere during the summer. All day we hear the crazy cacophonous sound. At the beginning of August it is a musical and charming sound, but by the end of the month it winds up into a terrible frenzy, a jungle-like madness pouring over the streets. Even Tokyo is awash with the throbbing whine and sizzling sounds of bugs in the heat.

Bugs hold a fascination for children. Summer festivals feature bug stores,



makeshift shops erected outdoors to sell beetles and other summer bugs. Some proffer horned beetles selling for hundreds of dollars that can be observed going through multiple steps of metamorphosis. For the Japanese,

the cicadas ring in the heat and the delicate tinkles of bell-bugs announce the coming of fall.

The pungent smell of mosquito repellent, called *katorisenko*, is the essence of Japanese summer. Introduced to Japan in 1885 by Americans, this insecticide, developed from a type of chrysanthemum, is pressed into a stylish coil shape. Its special pungency wafts from windows and alleyways. It sometimes billows from the mouths of traditional ceramic pigs used to hold the coils.

In old areas, people still leave their sliding front and back doors open to let in the air. Bamboo and reed blinds hang at entryways for privacy. Interior rooms have low tables and electric fans with strings attached that remind us of the flow of air. Visually, anyway, they make us feel cooler. Cotton summer kimono called *yukata* are taken out for the local street dancing, a celebration of the heat.

These last vestiges of old style summer will continue to survive, despite the declining need due to modern housing and electrical appliances. Sometimes, though, I wish we could go back to the sweaty hot summers of twenty years ago when I first arrived in Japan. They brought the members of the community together because it was too hot to remain inside during the evenings. In front of our homes, families would sit on benches, set off sparklers and greet passersby.

I also wish the wooden clog method of determining the weather would be re-instated. The accuracy is not very different and it is so much more fun and convenient to determine the weather oneself. Such a change might even revive flagging sales of traditional footwear. **JTI**

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