

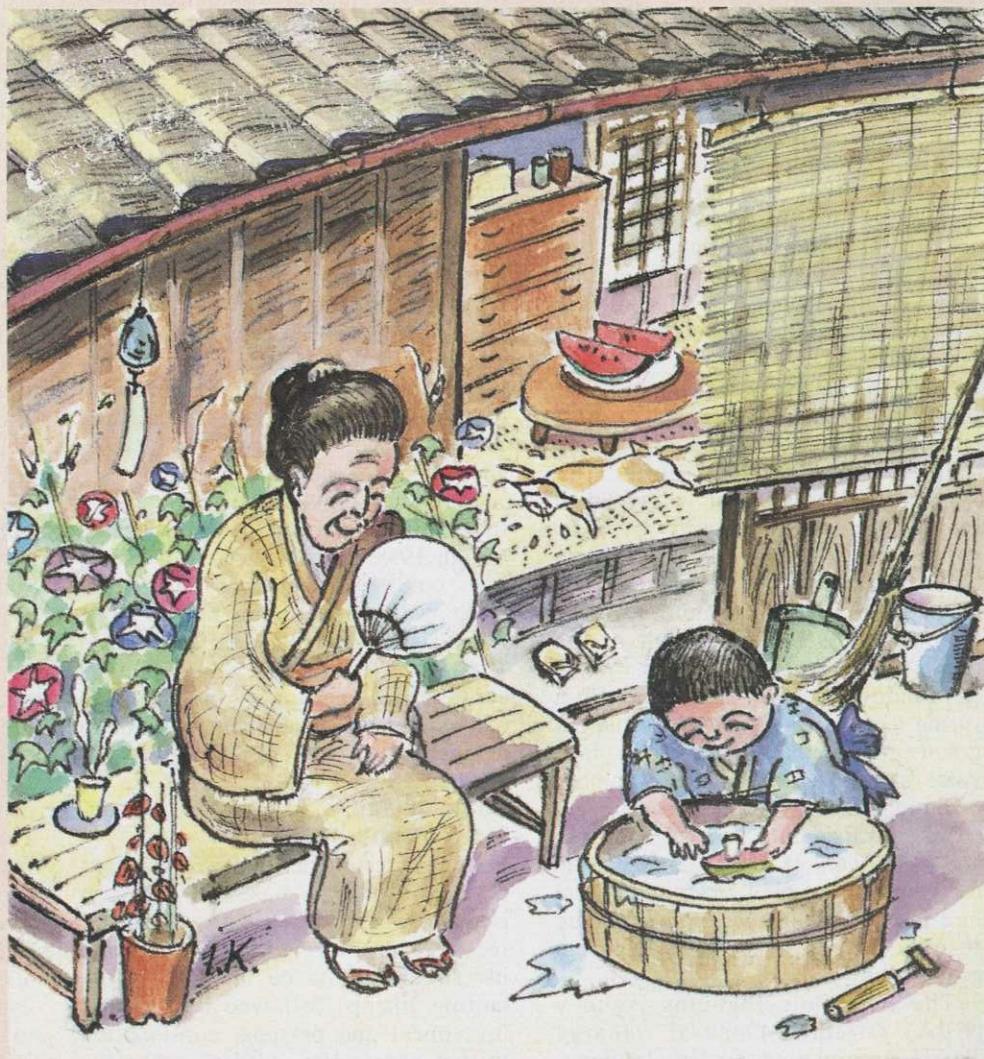
Modern Inconvenience

Article by Elizabeth Kiritani and illustrations by Kiritani Itsuo

W e are now suffering though the humidity and heat of a Japanese summer, but how many people here feel it?

Our neighbors used to set benches outside their homes in the evenings to cool off. Sliding doors were left open with a bamboo screen in front in the hopes that cool air might circulate. Acrid smelling mosquito coils burned, oval hand fans fluttered and neighbors would linger for a chat. Those hot sweaty, heat-blasted days used to be special. Now that we are comfortable in our air-conditioning we no longer hear the lovely tinkle of wind chimes announcing just a touch of breeze. And the frenzied, tropical whine of the cicadas is largely muffled. As my 80-year-old neighbor puts it, "It certainly is much more comfortable — but not much fun."

Air conditioning and other forms of convenience are obliterating our awareness of the seasons in Japan. Our feelings for the rituals of the past and for the time of year are dying. We live in an ultra convenient, season-less world where no particular time is important or sacrosanct. No longer do the Japanese have to wait for seasonal food. Cherries, grapefruit and all sorts of vegetables are available year round. The economic benefits for the farmer are great. The residue for the average citizen, however, is a leaching out of tradition and culture. Japan's younger generation no longer know when it is strawberry season, squid season or pounded rice season. We are living in a glut of luxury — anything is available at anytime.



Twenty years ago when I spent my first winter in Northern Japan, I waited with Setsuko Kobayashi next door for the appearance of "mikans." I had no idea what a mikan was, but my elderly neighbor's anticipation was infectious. We spent day after day discussing them. Sweet, seedless tangerines, mikans until recently were only available in Northern Japan right before New Years, signaling the

arrival of the end of the year.

It had been almost a year since Setsuko had tasted a tangerine, and she was looking forward to it. The first day they came on the market, we carried a bag of them to her home and, after placing one for her ancestors at the family altar, we knelt down at the low table to enjoy ours with green tea. How delicious and sweet those tangerines were, and how

precious. We savored every bite because after a month or so, we would no longer be able to enjoy them.

Nowadays, even in the summer, when I catch a glimpse of a tangerine at a department store, my heart races with the out-of-season anticipation of the New Year — a Pavlovian response that I hope I'll never lose. The joy of natural everyday things is bit by bit diminishing.

Sadly, Japan, like developed countries everywhere, has become overwhelmingly and facelessly "modern." Convenience stores are open all-night; giant supermarkets and malls thrive. Not too many years ago, shopping was an everyday event involving a stop at the local vegetable shop, the fishmonger, the meat shop, the tea shop and so forth. Each purchase exacted its weight in time; vendors were up on local news and scandals. Even a terse shop owner had customers who would chat one up endlessly. This daily shopping took time and provided a lot more than the goods purchased. Neighborhoods were close-knit in those days.

Japan has become more female friendly — no longer is a housewife tied to everyday housework. Stores sell take-home versions of the healthy, old-fashioned Japanese vegetable dishes such as burdock root, squash and bean curd lees with carrot as well as fried chicken and hamburgers. This is good news for those who want to pursue a career or even for those who just want to get out and have some fun.

On the other hand, with convenience has come a dreadful parching of the quality of life. Former Japan was a country rife with tradition: every season, every month, every festival had its special blessings and the individual along with the family and community would mark the passage of time and their lives with these special rites and foods. Local festivals are on the decline as is local communication.

Kids often eat their dinner from lunch boxes or at convenience stores with friends on their way to cram

school after regular school hours. No need to go home. Families spend little time together.

Japan has become rich, but the ratcheting up of the material level of everyday life makes it harder to find real pleasure. We are less busy with everyday chores than we used to be. With this good fortune, however, comes the loss of the feeling of seasons, seasonal foods, family and community that has for centuries been the focus of Japanese life.

Because of its varied climates and the movement of farming goods around the country, the United States lacks the same intensity of clear-cut, separate seasons that I experienced when I first moved to Japan. But even so, there are many American pastimes that still remain season-specific. The custom of making scented oranges for our closets at Christmas time is one example. Children sit at a table with an orange and an enormous pile of cloves in front of them. Their job is to stick the cloves into the orange, so that barely any of the orange peel can be seen. The clove-spiked object is then tied in red ribbon and hung in a closet. The fragrance permeates our clothing at that time of the year. Cloves still are Christmas for me, along with ribbon candy and mistletoe. I wonder, though, do American convenience stores now sell these ready-made? Or has clove-

scented deodorant in bottles replaced them?

In Japan twenty years ago, all stores were closed for at least five days starting January first, so if you didn't prepare ahead of time, you were in trouble. The end of December was a flurry of preparation, hard work and anticipation that contrasted wonderfully with the quiet first five days of the year that followed.

We no longer have to prepare. Stores are open New Year's Eve that are stocked with all of the seasonal foods in vacuum packed, dried, microwavable or frozen form. Some department stores open on New Year's Day, luring families out of their homes to go on shopping sprees. This is good for the economy, but it has sucked the soul and communication out of the family unit. What once was five days of family and community amity has become like any other day off: a time to travel, or a time to shop, or a time to go out for dinner.

The other day as I was walking from the subway station to work, I noticed a trendy looking couple in their teens teetering ahead of me on platform sandals. His hair was dyed pink, hers middle-aged gray. With one hand in each other's, both were holding wireless telephones to their ears with the other. I was so close behind them that I overheard their phone calls. The surprise was that they were engaged in a conversation between themselves via their hand phones.

Was this a walking installation or an odd sort of fashion statement? Or has it come to the point where people find it easier to communicate with each other second hand, through modern machinery? JIT

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