

Uji-bashi Bridge and Its Historic Tea House

Constructed around 1,380 years ago, Uji-bashi Bridge is recognized as one of the oldest bridges in Japan. At the foot of the bridge stands a tea house established over 860 years ago, whose owner, a *hashimori* bridge guard, continues to serve tea and watch over the bridge to this day. (Text: Morohashi Kumiko)

Located in Uji City, south of the city of Kyoto, Uji-bashi Bridge spans the Uji River, which runs through the center of town. This bridge connects Byodoin Temple¹ and Ujigami Shrine,² two World Heritage sites, and has become a landmark of Uji. We spoke with the Tourism Planning Section of the Tourism Promotion Division at Uji City Hall about the bridge's origins.

“According to the inscription on a stone monument at Hashidera Hojoin temple,³ Uji-bashi Bridge was erected in 646 by Doto, a monk from Gango-ji temple in Nara. After the bridge was built, Uji became a strategic location along the water and land transportation

routes between the ancient capital of Nara and the city of Kyoto, playing an important role in Japan's history. During the Heian period (794 – end of the 12th century), the Fujiwara clan, an aristocratic family at the height of their prosperity, built their villa here, and a splendid dynastic culture flourished. Ho'oudo Hall (Phoenix Hall) was built at Byodoin Temple to embody the idea of the Pure Land of Paradise in this world.”

Uji-bashi Bridge appears in the *Kokin Wakashu* (“Collection of Ancient and Modern Japanese Poetry”)⁵ and in Murasaki Shikibu's *Genji Monogatari* (“The Tale of Genji”),⁶ both masterpieces of Japanese literary history. In fact, Uji is known as the setting for the last ten



A statue of Murasaki Shikibu stands at the west end of Uji-bashi Bridge. The statue of the author was erected here in honor of the fact that the final ten chapters of *Genji Monogatari* are set in Uji.

Photo: Uji City Hall



This Japanese-style *sori-hashi* arched bridge is 101.8 meters long and 8.4 meters wide.

Photo: PIXTA



Tsuen Yusuke (president, Tsuen Co., Ltd.) of Tsuen Chaya, a tea house that has been serving customers for over 860 years.



Photo: Tsuen Chaya

Left: Rich matcha sundae made with an abundance of freshly ground Uji green tea (Tsuen Chaya)

Right: Visitors from overseas are particularly interested in the Fujitsubo, Uji *gyokuro* tea, and sweets set. (Tsuen Chaya)

of the 54 chapters in *Genji Monogatari*.

“The bridge was reconstructed to its current state in March 1996. Although it is now made of concrete, it is designed as it was when it was constructed in wood. With balustrade and plates made of Japanese cypress and decorative *giboshi*⁷ post caps in bronze, Uji-bashi Bridge retains its historical image. The extended platform on the upstream side, called the San-no-ma, is said to have housed a shrine to the bridge’s guardian deity, the Hashihime. It is also where renowned 16th-century warlord Toyotomi Hideyoshi had water drawn for a tea ceremony. Even after the center of politics moved from Kyoto to Edo (modern day Tokyo) in Japan’s early modern period, Uji tea was prized for its superior quality, as it still is today.”

At the foot of Uji-bashi Bridge stands Tsuen Chaya, a tea house established some 863 years ago, which



Photo: Tsuen Chaya

The Tsuen Chaya building (a Kyoto Prefecture designated cultural property) was constructed in 1672.

continues to serve tea to this day. We spoke with owner Tsuen Yusuke, president of Tsuen Co., Ltd.

“Tsuen Chaya began when my family was appointed *hashimori*, guardian of Uji-bashi Bridge. We have been serving tea here since 1160. Our job is to combine tea leaves to create blends with a well-rounded flavor.”

These days, visitors from overseas come to the teahouse in search of original steamed *sencha* and shade-grown *gyokuro* teas.


“I like the sunset hours on Uji-bashi. The mountains and the river upstream are especially beautiful, so this is definitely a sight you should see when you visit Uji.” 



Photo: Uji City Hall

During the Uji Tea Festival, held on the first Sunday in October, water is drawn from the extended San-no-ma platform.

1. A temple founded in 1052 by Fujiwara Yorimichi in Uji City, Kyoto Prefecture. Ho'oudo Hall (Phoenix Hall), with phoenixes perched atop the roof. It is a designated national treasure. It was registered in 1994 as a UNESCO World Heritage site. Along with Ujigami Shrine and other properties, the site is listed as a Historical Monument of Ancient Kyoto.
2. The main shrine, a national treasure, is renowned as the oldest original shrine building in Japan, built in the 900s.
3. The temple was built by Prince Shotoku to pray for protection, and after Uji-bashi Bridge was erected, was assigned the role of bridge guardian temple. The Uji-bashi Danpi stone monument on the temple grounds is inscribed with the year that the Uji-bashi Bridge was built.
4. The first imperial anthology of waka poems, compiled in 905 by Ki no Tsurayuki and three other renowned poets. The 20-volume anthology with over 1,000 poems was presented to the emperor.
5. Author, poet, and lady-in-waiting in the 900s (mid-Heian period). Known as the author of *Genji Monogatari* (“The Tale of Genji”) and *Murasaki Shikibu Nikki* (“The Diary of Murasaki Shikibu”), she is a leading figure in Japanese literary history.
6. *Genji Monogatari* is world-renowned as a classic work of Japanese literature. Set in Uji, the latter half of the 54-chapter novel is known as Uji Jucho, suggesting that the characters’ residences were located on the east and west banks of the Uji River.
7. Balustrades on palaces, bridges, bridge-like corridors, and other structures are known as *koran*. The metal ornaments that top the posts, called *giboshi*, are shaped to resemble Nyoi-hoju or *cintamani* (of Buddhist origin, meaning “magical jewel that manifests whatever one wishes”).