
Various Seasonal Traditions Symbolizing Summer in Japan

As a country that has cherished the four seasons since ancient times, Japan has some unique seasonal traditions that can be enjoyed only during that specific time of year. We interviewed Miura Yasuko, a Japanese culture researcher, about the unique and diverse summer traditions of Japan, from vibrant events such as festivals and fireworks, to cool summer kimono and refreshing shaved ice.

What is the period of time defined in Japan as “summer”?

According to the calendar, summer in Japan begins on a day in early May called *rikka* (literally “start of summer”), and ends on the day before *rissu* (“start of fall”) in early August. The Japanese use a system that breaks the four seasons into 24 solar terms,¹ and this system

did not change when Japan made the transition from the old calendar to the new calendar.² However, as a season that we actually experience, in meteorological terms summer spans the months of June, July, and August. This is the period with which we associate the variety of summer traditions in Japan.



Miura Yasuko,
Japanese culture researcher

The expression *fubutsu-shi* (seasonal traditions) is used quite often, but what does it mean and how has it recognized?

If we examine the literally means in Japanese *fubutsu-shi*, which is usually translated as “seasonal traditions,” it can also mean poems (*shi*) that describe scenery, seasons, and other natural features (*fubutsu*) in an emotional manner. However, we usually use it as a generic term for a variety of seasonal characteristics. In Japan, there are four sea-



Mt. Fuji shows its summer silhouette behind hydrangea in full bloom

sons—spring, summer, fall, and winter—and the term “seasonal traditions” refers to the unique culture, customs, natural phenomena, food, and products that symbolize each of these seasons.

Since objects and events that evoke the ambience of summer are described as “seasonal traditions,” I think that the understanding of what constitutes such a tradition may differ depending on the region, the people, or the time period. On the other hand, I also find it interesting that there are events and customs, such as festivals and fireworks, which evoke a shared awareness among Japanese people as typical summer traditions.

What do you think is the traditional Japanese perception of summer as a season?

Summer is a vibrant and active season when the sun is at its most powerful. While it is an important time for the crops to grow, the Japanese summer is also very hot and humid, which makes it quite uncomfortable in terms of lifestyle. I think summer could be defined as the season when Japanese people find ways to overcome the stifling heat with wisdom and original ideas.

Please tell us again about the customs, events, and traditions unique to this hot and humid Japanese summer.

The first step in preparation for summer is *koromogae*, or the seasonal changing of clothing. It is conducted around June 1, by replacing the contents of chests and closets with clothing appropriate for the hot season. June is also the time when fireflies can be observed in various regions around Japan, so there is also the prac-



Nagoshi-no-harae, a summer ritual of purification by passing through a ring of bundled grass



Shochu-mimai greeting cards are sent during the period that starts around July 7 (also known as *shosho*, lit. “small heat”), which is the beginning of one of the 24 solar terms, and ends around August 7, the day before *risshu* (“beginning of fall”)

tice of firefly-viewing (see page 20), in which people can admire the blinking glow of fireflies while cooling off in the night air. At the end of June, an event called “Nagoshi-no-harae (literally “a ritual to purify the mind and body for overcoming the summer”)” is held. This is the event where people pass through rings called *chinowa*³ set up at Shinto shrines in various regions. The aim of that is to purify the *kegare* (impurity, defilement) of the first half of the year and praying for sound health in the second half.

In July, the heat becomes even more intense. To express their sympathy and concern for friends and relatives during the height of this very hot season, the Japanese send summer greetings called *shochu-mimai* and *zansho-mimai*, usually in the form of postcards. It is an important cultural practice that shows kindness and inform the current situation each other. July is also the time of regional summer festivals. These festivals, such as *Tanabata* (the Star Festival), symbolize various summer events (see page 14), and also express the wishes of the common people for a bountiful harvest and good health.

Under the traditional Japanese calendar, the period of 18 days leading up to the day before the first day of autumn is known as midsummer (“*natsu no doyo*” in Japanese) and the Day of the Ox that falls during this period is called the Midsummer Day of the Ox (“*doyo no ushi no hi*”) (July 30 this year). On this day, it is customary to eat foods that begin with the sound “u” such as *unagi* (eel), different types of *uri* (gourds) like cucumbers and bitter melons, and *udon* noodles, as people believe such foods will give them stamina to beat the summer fatigue and get through this hot and



Photo: PIXTA

The period of approximately 18 days leading up to August 7 is known as midsummer, and there is saying that on the Midsummer Day of the Ox (July 30 this year) it is good for the health to eat *unaju* (a dish of grilled eel fillets served over white rice in a rectangular lacquered box).

humid period. This is an example of the way Japanese take care of their health by choosing a nutritious diet.

The major event in August is Obon. In most regions, Obon is typically observed around August 15, although there are some areas, where it is celebrated in mid-July. Obon is a summer festival of honoring the ancestors, so during the period of Obon people welcome back the spirits of their ancestors. It is also an important event for families to gather, not only to make offerings to their ancestors, but also to express gratitude to parents and grandparents who are still alive, and to deepen family bonds. That is why there is a longer break called the “Obon holiday” in Japan during this time of the year. Also during the Obon period, Bon festivals and firework events (see page 12) are held throughout Japan, providing cool and refreshing evening entertainment to many people.

Can you tell us about some traditional practices that were born out of efforts to keep cool in the summer back in the times when there was no air conditioning?

Traditional Japanese houses are in fact designed for summer. According to *Tsurezuregusa* (“Essays in Idleness”), a collection of essays on wide-ranging topics written by Yoshida Kenko, a poet and essayist active in the first half of the 14th century, “Houses should be built with summer chiefly in mind.” Since ancient times, traditional Japanese houses have been designed

in quite an ingenious manner to utilize the flow of the wind and to release the heat that accumulates inside the house.

One way to achieve this is to attach *sudare* or *yoshizu*⁴ screens on the outside of the house. It is important to leave a gap between the screens and the house, because it creates shade which cools the air while also improving ventilation.

There is also the practice of *uchimizu*, or sprinkling water in front of one’s house and on the street to lower the ground surface temperature. This is a custom that has been part of the Japanese summer way of life for generations. It produces the effect of cooling the house because water takes heat when vaporizing and creates wind convection that brings cooled air into the house. I think this is a very smart way of keeping cool.

Another staple of the Japanese summer, which lets us know that the wind is blowing, is the wind chime (see page 22). I think it is an ingenious summer device that creates a refreshing breezy image through its beautiful ringing sound. Hand fans such as *sensu* (folding fan) and *uchiwa* (non-foldable fan) that are used indoors to move the air are also part of the Japanese summer traditions.

Other ways to create a cool and refreshing ambience indoors and around the house are to keep goldfish in special bowls, or hang a variety of evergreen climbing ferns (*tsuru-shinobu*) in baskets under the eaves.

In their daily lives, Japanese people often go out in the cool of the evening wearing a *yukata*.⁵ *Yukata* was



Photo: PIXTA

Sudare are Japanese-style blinds or screens that help people get through the heat and humidity of summer.



Yukata-clad women engage in the practice of *uchimizu*.

originally a type of kimono people wore as a bathrobe when they went to take a bath. Later, they started wearing it after taking a bath, and gradually *yukata* evolved into a kimono people wore when they relaxed at home and a type of casual street wear for an evening stroll. Nowadays, it has become a fashionable item that people purchase or have newly made to wear on summer outings.

When it comes to clothing, traditionally, Japanese people have placed great importance on choosing materials, colors, and patterns appropriate for each season. They do that not only for their own comfort, but also to convey a sense of the season to those around them.

Finally, do you have any recommendations for visitors from overseas about ways to spend the summer, or any summer traditions in Japan you would like them to experience?

I would recommend that they see some of Japan's major summer festivals (see pages 10 and 18), and, if a chance presents itself, try wearing a *yukata* at one of these festivals. I also hope that they will see the exquisitely beautiful fireworks that are unique to Japan (see page 12).

Visitors who travel to *satoiyama* in the rural countryside should definitely experience firefly-viewing. Also, although it is somewhat trivial, I hope they get to see firsthand the wisdom of a lifestyle that uses the natural cooling power of wind.

As for traditional Japanese summer foods, I recommend that visitors experience the custom of keeping cool with refreshing foods that are unique to this time of year, such as *hiyamugi* and *somen*⁶ noodles, as well as *kakigori* (shaved ice) and *hiyayakko* (chilled tofu), which taste exceptionally cool and delicious in summer.

The purely Japanese culture of *mitate*, which entails visual ways of expression that produce freshness and elements of surprise, is another playful way to enjoy the cool appearance and exciting flavors of summer *kaiseki* cuisine⁷ and Kyoto-style confectionery (see page 16).

Hot and humid, summer in Japan is physically challenging, but it also provides the pleasure of encountering some unique seasonal traditions. I hope visitors from overseas can feel how finely attuned Japanese people are to the variety of ways to enjoy this season. ㊦



With ice on a glass plate, the ingenious visual representation of this *somen* dish creates a cool impression.

1. The year is divided into four seasons (spring, summer, fall, and winter), each of which is subdivided into six solar terms. Even today, the first day of each term has a name descriptive of the season, such as *risshun* (start of spring), *shunbun* (the vernal equinox), and *geshi* (the summer solstice).
 2. In 1872, Japan adopted the Gregorian (solar) calendar and called it "the new calendar." The lunisolar calendar that had been used since ancient times is called "the old calendar."
 3. A large ring made of bundled grass, cogongrass, and straw
 4. *Sudare* are traditional Japanese screens or blinds, made of thinly-split bamboo, reed, or other natural materials, woven together. *Yoshizu* are larger screens made of reed that are used by propping them up against the eaves of the house.
 5. A type of unlined long kimono made of printed cotton

6. A type of dried noodles made of wheat flour. According to the standards of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, noodles with diameter less than 1.3 mm are classified as *somen*, and noodles with diameter 1.3 mm or more but less than 1.7 mm are classified as *hiyamugi*.
 7. The term *kaiseki* originally referred to a simplified course meal version of *honzen ryori*, the most highly-ritualized style of preparing and serving food in traditional Japanese cuisine, which has been developed and refined since the 14th century. Nowadays, it is often used to describe a Japanese course meal served with sake.
 See "Japanese Cuisine Synchronized with the Seasons" in the June 2022 issue of Highlighting Japan https://www.gov-online.go.jp/eng/publicity/book/hlj/html/202206/202206_03_en.html