

Kodomo no Hi – Celebrating Children’s Day in Japan

By Kathy Sorensen

The fifth day of the fifth month (May 5) is considered a lucky day in the Japanese culture. From about the ninth century, it was a day when families celebrated their sons, and until 1948, it was known as Boy’s Day. Then the government changed it to a national holiday for both boys and girls and called it Children’s Day or *Kodomo no Hi*.

Children’s Day is celebrated in a most colorful way; kites, streamers and windsocks representing colorful fish called carp fill the skies as families fly them from poles in their gardens and yards. The carp is a symbol of courage, endurance, perseverance, and strength because it swims upstream against the current. The design of the pennants was inspired by a Chinese legend that a strong carp could become a dragon by swimming *up* a waterfall. The carp (called *koi* in Japanese) symbolizes the parents’ hope for their children to be successful. A famous folksong about the carp is “*Koinobori*.”

About a month before Children’s Day, Japanese families with young boys display a miniature set of samurai warrior armor in their houses. On May 5, boys sometimes wear a replica samurai helmet. (The samurai were the most noble and famous warriors of ancient Japan.) Some families also display a model of a Japanese folk hero named Kintaro. Kintaro was a boy with superhuman strength who grew up to be a famous warrior. The displays symbolize the hope of the family that their son will grow up brave and strong. (Don’t worry, the girls have their own day on March 3, the third day of the third month, when they display their own dolls, many of which have been passed down for generations.)

About a week before the May 5th celebration, Japanese cake shops begin to sell the traditional treats of Children’s Day, *kashiwa-mochi* (a rice cake filled with sweet bean paste and wrapped with an oak leaf) and *chimaki* (steamed sticky rice powder with sugar wrapped with bamboo leaves). Children enjoy eating these treats, and families often leave some of the treats as offerings at shrines and memorials.

When the fifth day of May finally arrives, families celebrate the growth, health and happiness of their children. Some activities are as simple as measuring each child’s height to see how much he or she grew over the year. All over Japan, activities and events are held which highlight children. Some involve the arts, like music, theater, origami, etc. Others involve equestrian shows and sports. There is even a Children’s Olympics. It is modeled after the traditional world Olympics, complete with a torch relay, and is held in the stadium that was the main arena for the 1964 Olympics in Tokyo—the National Kasumigaoka Stadium.

The children do not have to go to school on Children’s Day. In fact, there are three other holidays in the same week; so many families go on vacation then. It is called the Golden Week because, depending how the holidays fall with the weekends, there could be a vacation from seven to ten days long! This year (2009) Golden Week is from April 29 through May 6. Now that’s what I call lucky!

