

TANABATA 七夕祭り

In Japan, 7 July is *Tanabata* or the Star Festival. It is one Japan's five traditional seasonal festivals known as *sekku*. *Tanabata* originated from a Chinese legend of two stars which are thwarted lovers who can only meet once a year, on the seventh day of the seventh lunar month. Today their annual reunion is seen as a time to make wishes to the heavens—to wish upon a star or two.

The basic story goes that the Princess Weaver Star and the Cowherd Star (which are really the Vega and Altair stars) have been condemned to exist apart on either side of the Milky Way because they angered the Princess's father, the King. It seems he was upset that the Princess neglected her weaving and the cowherd his cows. So he banished them and allowed them to meet only once a year.

There are, however, different tellings of this story as the Chinese legend mixed with local folktales about a maiden from the heavens, known as *Tanabatsume*, who wove clothes for the gods*.

As with many Japanese festivals that are found nationwide, there are regional differences in the way they

are observed. In the case of *tanabata*, the very date of the festival may be 7 July or 7 August. This difference of a full month has come about because Japan used a lunar calendar before adopting the Gregorian calendar in 1873CE**. Celebrating *tanabata* in August is actually closer to the original lunar date for the festival compared to celebrating it in July. Some *tanabata* customs overlap with Bon traditions—O-Bon is the observance to welcome back the spirits of the ancestors and is held from 13 to 15 July, yet again, August in some areas.

Tanabata is said to have been first introduced to Japan during the Nara Period (710-794CE) and was observed by the imperial court. The festival became widespread during the Edo Period (1600-1867CE) and the Tokugawa Shogunate declared it as one of the five main *sekku*.

While the aristocracy may once have composed poems for the occasion, in modern Japan *tanabata* has in many ways become a children's festival. At kindergartens and primary schools throughout the country, even at local railway stations, you can see bamboo branches hung with paper ornaments and colourful wishing strips. These wishing strips are known as *tanzaku* and the wishes written on them range from new toys to luck in exams and health and happiness for the family.



* A version of the *Tanabatsume* legend can be found on the Web Japan site: <http://web-japan.org/kidsweb/folk/tanabata/index.html>.

** To challenge students of Japanese history and culture further, the official civil calendar was lunar; farmers used a solar calendar devised by Chinese astronomers which was best suited to tell them when to plant and harvest crops etc.

Tanabata in Sendai

The city of Sendai in Miyagi prefecture is famous throughout Japan for its Tanabata festival and the spectacular *tanabata* decorations such as those pictured here which attract more than 2 million tourists# to the city in August. This is quite remarkable when you consider the city itself has a population of around one million. Hiratsuka is another city whose festival attracts many tourists.

City of Sendai: www.city.sendai.jp/kikaku/kokusai/english/maturi.html, 8 June 2010

Sekku 節句

Three of the five seasonal festivals that were prescribed by the Tokugawa Shogunate are still well known and widely observed within Japan. In addition to Tanabata (7 July), 3 March is *Jōshi no Sekku*, known as *Momo no Sekku* (Peach Festival) and this is the Doll's Festival. *Kodomo no Hi*, Children's Day, is another *sekku* and falls on 5 May—it is *Tango no Sekku*, also called *Shōbu no Sekku* (Iris Festival). The remaining two *sekku* are 7 January, *Jinjitsu no Sekku*, commonly called *Nanakusa no Sekku* (Seven Herb Festival), and 9 September, *Chōyō no Sekku*, known as *Kiku no Sekku* (Chrysanthemum Festival).