

I'm seven.
七
I'm five.
五
I'm three.
三

In a country that has a public holiday for Children's Day (5 May) it may seem strange to have another annual festival for young children, but that's exactly what **Shichi-go-san** is—an annual event for children aged three, five and seven.

The Shichi-go-san (Seven Five Three) Festival falls on 15 November. This date was chosen because on the traditional Japanese calendar it is considered to be an auspicious day. However, the day is not a national holiday, and this means most families now observe the celebration on the weekend before or after the fifteenth when it falls on a weekday.

As with many Japanese festivals the significance of the rituals have long histories, but these are not necessarily so well known. Moreover, the way the event is observed has varied from place to place and over time.

In most regions of Japan today, boys and girls aged three, boys aged five and girls aged seven visit a Shinto shrine with their parents for the Shichi-go-san festival.

The basic idea today is to give thanks for the well-being of your child and to pray for his or her future health and happiness.

In the past it was common for the family to visit their local shrine. Today, however, many families opt to take their children to the better known and larger shrines.

So, why is it seven, five and three?

It used to be the custom that children



Shichi-go-san at Sumiyoshi Taisha, a famous 'grand shrine' in Osaka

were not fully accepted into society until the age of seven and it was believed that they needed divine protection to guard against bad luck at certain ages.

There was a series of rituals that children went through before they reached seven years and were recognised as social entities. In many parts of Japan, children are still received as members of a Shinto shrine's parish at the age of seven.

During the medieval period, aristocratic and samurai families celebrated the healthy growth of their children with special rituals. At the age of three both boys and girls were allowed to grow their hair, having had it shaven until then. Boys aged five were allowed to wear *hakama* for the first time in public. At the age of seven, girls were able to wear the proper *obi* (kimono belt) instead of just a sash.

Shichi-go-san spread throughout society during the Edo Period (1600-1867) and today's customs evolved during the Meiji Period (1868-1912).

The earlier significance of the observance is arguably forgotten by many Japanese today. Certainly for the children involved it is a happy occasion. They get fussed over, many get to wear their first formal kimono and they get bags of sweets called *chitose-ame*.

Chitose literally means 'a thousand years', but can be thought of as 'a very long time' - the long and prosperous lives that parents wish for their children. The bag's design will often have turtles or cranes, symbols of long life. The sweets themselves are long in shape.

Families will often give *chitose-ame* to family members and neighbours as the sweets themselves are thought to be lucky.



Letters to the Editor

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