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Hinamatsuri

As March approaches, we often see sets of traditional Japanese dolls on display. They are called “Hina-dolls” and are displayed for Hinamatsuri (Doll’s Festival) held on March 3. Hinamatsuri is an event for girls, and in addition to Hina dolls, arrangements of peach blossoms, sweet white sake, and so on are offered to wish for the health and happiness of girls.

1 The Origins of the Hinamatsuri

Hinamatsuri dates back to around 300 A.D. in China. The beginning of March is a time of a seasonal change and people used to believe that bad spirits could bring disasters around that time. Formerly in China there was a custom to drive away bad spirits near rivers and the sea. This tradition was introduced to Japan more than 1,000 years ago. People in Japan made dolls to take on people's misfortunes, and floated them into rivers or the sea. The event eventually changed to displaying dolls in private homes, and this custom has continued to the present.

The decorations and foods eaten on the day also have meaning. Peach blossoms are displayed because the peach tree was considered a sacred tree



that could drive away evil spirits, and sweet white sake was originally made with an infusion of peach blossoms.

2 Why do Hina decorations feature a couple of male and female dolls?

Most Hina ornaments are centered around a pair of male and female dolls. These are said to represent the wedding ceremony of an Emperor and Empress in traditional court attire from the Heian period (over 1000 years ago in Japan). In fact, the attire is still used by the imperial family for weddings. Hina ornaments convey wishes for a happy marriage.



Several customs related to this wish still remain today.

One of them is the hard-shell clam (a kind of shellfish). During this season, many clams are sold at supermarkets and served in soup. The clam is a bivalve shell. Separated in two, the clam will never fit well into a different shell. They can only be paired with the shell to which they were originally attached. The hard-shell clam represents a wish that a girl will find a marriage partner to match her personality.

Hina decorations are supposed to be displayed early and put away as soon as March 3rd is over. If you take the Hina dolls out of closet early (from the place where they are kept), it means that you take your daughter out of the house, in other words, your daughter can get married early.

Also, it is important not to delay putting the dolls back in the closet until the following year. "Putting away the Hina dolls promptly" means "putting away the daughter promptly," (so the daughter can get married soon).

The custom represents the parents' wish for their daughter to get married early and have a happy life. Of course, this thinking represents a time when marriage was the accepted norm.

I have a daughter, and I used to display Hina dolls. One year I forgot to put them away promptly because I was busy, and I remember feeling a bit panicked.

This incident happened quite a long time ago, but it also seemed that the Japanese view of marriage was changing around that time. Some of my friends even said, "I don't want my daughter to get married early, so I'll keep our Hina decorations on display after March 3rd!"

These customs and the form of Hina decorations may change with the times.

3 Various types of Hina decorations

There are many types of Hina decorations, among which two types are most commonly seen. One is called "Dan-kazari," a gorgeous set with attendants, marriage furniture such as dressing tables and so on, displayed on seven stair-like tiers. The other is the "Hira-kazari," which is a simpler male-female pair of dolls with fewer ornaments. The smaller hira-kazari is now more popular in urban areas where houses don't really have space to display the seven tiers.

I was born more than 50 years ago, when my parents had just come from the countryside to start their life in Tokyo. They could not afford to buy a Hina doll set, so instead, they bought one small Japanese doll to celebrate my birth. I completely forgot about the doll after I got married and moved out of my parents' house. The doll was in my parents' house for more than half a century. After my parents passed away, I found it but couldn't get rid of it for a long time. Recently I finally made up my mind and sent it to a temple for prayers and a respectful disposal.

Some families with a long history and honorable origins have handed down gorgeous seven-tiered sets from generation to generation. To show these precious decorations to the general public, many events are held during the Hinamatsuri season.

Other unique local variations such as Hanging dolls (dolls not arranged on tiers but suspended from strings) are exhibited in some areas of Japan.

Hinamatsuri may be over by the time this issue is published. Please remember to drop by when the Hinamatsuri season comes around again and enjoy our display.

Information from Nerima City Regional Promotion Section

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【Venue】 Regional Promotion Office, 9th floor of Nerima City Main Building

6-12-1, Toyotamakita, Nerima City

【Telephone Number】 03-5984-4333

【Open】 1:00p.m.-5:00p.m.

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【Nerima City Official HP】

<https://www.city.nerima.tokyo.jp/gaikokunohitomuke/bunka.html>

【QR】



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