helen's fantasia

JAPAN: Vignettes

BY HELEN WESSON

NAGAKO

When I saw her she was a short, stoutish, matronly figure with the air of a contented wife and mother. She could have been an anonymous member of any women's club. But for love of her the Son of Heaven endangered a 7,000-year dynasty and risked his own divine life. She is the Empress of Japan.

The Prince Regent who is now Emperor of Japan was the first Crown Prince to choose his own wife. Previously, marriages had been arranged by Imperial Court officials purely for political convenience and with much jealousy and conspiracy among the five rival clans which for generations had provided consorts for the Emperors of Japan. This was the custom of the people also. Marriages were (and are) arranged by parents for business or other practical reasons, and the union designed for the production of male children. A Japanese wife is not even called upon to entertain, as we do in our homes. Yet, not surprisingly, you'll find the divorce rate much lower than in America.

With the help of his mother, the Empress, and an old professor-confidant, the Prince Regent was able to choose secretly from among the eligible maidens, and to his choice Hirohito remained steadfast through the most involved maneuverings against the match, defying not only tradition and Royal advisors, but in doing so, his own unbelligerent nature. After their engagement was announced, Princess Nagako saw her betrothed only nine times in the next seven years, years of rigorous training, uncertain years because the conspiracies against the marriage raged on the Ministerial level. They were married on January 26, 1924.

By the 1930's, the Empress had

given birth four times -- alas, all girls. In accordance with the Imperial Succession Law, , the throne can pass only to a male. In the days before the Meiji Restoration, this could be by adoption, but the Emperor Meiji decreed that the heir be of the Emperor's blood, by his consort or royal concubines. Hirohito's own father had been the son of a concubine; Empress Nagako had eighteen sisters and brothers, only three of them by her mother.

Pressure on his Divine Majesty by Court advisors tactfully but relentlessly increased. Military fanaticism and assassination plots, the Manchuria and China involvements, and the sensitive state of international affairs bred emotional instability among the masses. The Court attendants pleaded: a son of the Divine Tenno would cause his people to rejoice.

The Shimpeitai, Soldiers of God, dedicated fanatics of Japanese militarism, conspired first to replace Hirohito, and then to assassinate him. Their reason was his manifested disapproval of Japan's military course; their excuse his failure to produce an heir for the throne.

Meanwhile the eligible Court ladies buzzed and tittered, primped and waited, as a succession of statesmen implored the Emperor "for the sake of Japan, for the sake of the Imperial line, for the sake of his people...."

A gentle man, the Emperor wished to hurt noone, least of all his wife and their comfortable companionship. Knowing he was vulnerable to the Shimpeitai, he yet remained adamant, cool and serene.

Then, in December 1933, the Empress gave birth to Crown Prince Akihito. When he w as told it was a boy, the Divine Tenno was only human. "Are you sure?" he asked.[1]

While we were in Japan, Akihito chose his own bride, a commoner, and our household celebrated with the rest of Japan when their son was born in due course.

During World War II, Occidental dress went into disfavor in Japan. In the latter part of the war, even the Empress appeared in the women's official austerity costume -- mompei, a shapeless coverall completely sexless, used for farm work. Principal cities except Kyoto were bombed and treasured kimono lost, and subsequently could not be replaced. During the eight years of the Occupation the Empress made her important New Year's Day appearances in Occidental dress, partly in deference to the conqueror, partly as a gesture of self-denial. This made Western dress fashionable not only among those who must choose it because of budgetary reasons, but also among the fashion-minded rich. Besides, Western dress was more suitable to the needs of city people who must fight for a hold on trains and subways.

The first New Year's Day after the Occupation ended, the Empress made her appearance in traditional kimono. Soon after, Matsuya, a leading department store in Tokyo, most foreign-minded city in Japan -- indeed, one of the most cosmopolitan, sophisticated cities in the world -- reported that its kimono were outselling foreign dress three to one despite the fact that the traditional costume is far more expensive and restricting.

(right:
Shimenawa)

SHIN-NEN

OMEDETO

GOZAIMASU

(Felicitous greetings
for the New Year)

Each Japanese wishes to visit the Imperial Palace Grounds on New Year's Day, at least once in his life, to bow homage to his beloved Emperor and Empress. So great are the crowds who make this pilgrimage that one year, I remember, 17 were killed in the crush in the spacious, open courtyard grounds, and many maimed and blinded by the wooden geta (platformed clogs).

Japanese explaining their customs to the West often remark that Japan is a "topsy-turvy land," from our viewpoint. The year-end holidays are an example. With the year-end bonus in hand, or almost due, Karisimasu (Christmas) is celebrated drunkenly and raucously. Japan is not a Christian nation, but why turn down any excuse to make merry and give gifts?

New Year's, however, is a most reverent time. Much preparation in the usual Japanese formalistic manner keeps all busy. The women clean the house of the old year's dirt and bad luck so the kami (divine spirit) will enter, and prepare meals beforehand -- no cooking on New Year's Day. A fresh shimenawa --- intricately-twisted straw rope from which hangs white folded prayer papers (see illustration) -- is hung above the gate, to bar evil, and assure the kami of a clean, pure place. Shimenawa was particularly impressive across the huge, red-lacquered gate, with Chinese tile roof, which made our home, Akamon (Red Gate), a Yokohama landmark.

On each side of entrances, but particularly of investing firms which choose to flaunt prosperity, stand kodamatsu (see green illustration) of bamboo, pine and plum blossom, tied with ropes in a most formalistic manner, to welcome good. Displayed prominently in Akamon were the two balls of mochi (rice dough) like a small snow man, with a tangerine atop anchoring a slice of dried tuna. The flower arrangement included a particular lavender cabbage unknown in America, I believe, grown especially for this holiday; and pine for longevity, and red berries.

The ancient Chinese were often seen on New Year's Day walking about in broad sunlight with a lighted lantern. They must pay all their debts before the New Year, and by not admitting the Day had already dawned (and was well over) they were saving face as they paid their debts too late. The Japanese, with year-end bonuses, pay their debts of the old year, and some bonus money will surely go for kimono or accessories (the obi sash or the over-kimono can be astonishingly expensive), just as we Americans usually buy new Easter outfits. Plum blossom patterns are popular for New Year's. Husbands

and fathers are generous as silk kimono have always been a hedge against inflation. In fact, during World War II, many farmers owned kimono for the first time as the city people bartered for needed rice.

"Ringing in the New Year" has a somber meaning in Japan. Exactly at midnight New Year's Eve, a resplendently garbed priest swings a large log clapper against a huge temple bell. It strikes 108 times, and according to Buddhist belief, each of the 108 sins of man are driven away, and the atmosphere purified for the New Year. At a party in Tokyo, I heard from afar the impressive tolling of the bell at Asakusa Sensoji Temple, always crowded with w orshippers this night. (Meanwhile back home, young Sheldon and David, with Shin-chan (cooksan's son) were being catered to with every Japanese delicacy of the occasion, and no geisha ever gave more attentive care than did the servants to the young masters seated on zabuton (cushions) on the floor.)

When the solemnity is over, the Japanese begin days of celebration and merriment. Everything comes to a standstill for seven days, and offices begin to open January 8, "but not very." Just as we have an Easter Parade, revelers walk the Ginza in their new suits and kimono. Girls, like butterflies, their arms gaily-colored wings, dart about playing shuttlecock with special hagoita (boards). Some of these hagoita are elaborately decorated with silk three-dimensional figures to be presented to favorite geisha by their patrons, and may cost $100 or more. Boys fly kites of all shapes.

The Japanese Post Office -- which used to go on strike right at the year-end rush when Christmas gifts were arriving from Stateside! -- makes a fortune as everyone exchanges New Year's cards with everyone else. These are what we would call postal cards, on which the Japanese stamp greetings with special rubber stamps, purchased at stationery counters, which depict the Oriental zodiac symbol of the new year (for instance, Cock for 1969) perhaps with pine for longevity, and greetings in artistic calligraphy.

Gifts are also exchanged, chosen with protocol care, and always carried in a silk furoshiki (square scarf). (A furoshiki was used to carry everything from milady's shopping, to a man's brief case; I have even seen a carpenter carrying long boards by a cotton furoshiki around the center!) For New Year's in Japan is everybody's birthday. Everyone is born one year old, and adds a year each New Year's. Last year's ills are wiped clean. Each New Year is a fresh start.

SETSUBUN

People have barely recovered from the New Year's revelry and suddenly it's February and another celebration. The Chinese celebrate New Year's in February. On February 3, the Japanese celebrate Setsubun, which marks the parting of the seasons and is the day before the beginning of spring according to the old canendar. Traditionally, red beans are thrown for the purpose of exorcising evil spirits, to shouts of "Devils out, fortune in." Hundreds of thousands of worshippers pack the temples, now prepared with police and doctors against mishaps as the people grab for the beans the priests throw. It is an excuse for adult revelry, even fancy costumes. At Akamon it was fun for two little American boys who, with the servants playing along, donned celluloid masks depicting oni (ogres), and ran from one door of the house to another as the beans were thrown at them. Then, "Oni wa soto, Fuku wa uchi," they'd cry, reversing roles to be on both sides of the fun!

O MATSURI
Festivals

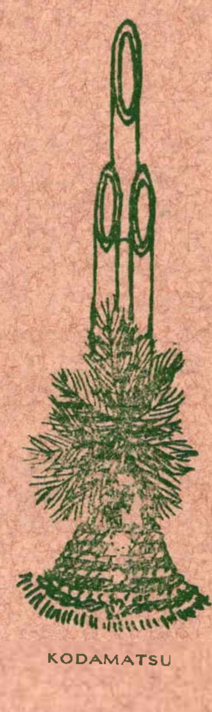
In March, of course, is the famed Girls' Festival, Hina Matsuri, with its formalist arrangement of Court dolls on five or seven steps (Dairibina). ((Visitors to Matsumon can view Pam's behind ceiling-height glass.-HW)) The girls serve origami (folded paper) cups of special colored rice tidbits (like pastel-colored Rice Krispies) and tiny sake cups of a special sweet, thick white bland rice wine. This festival actually derived from an ancient rite for removing evil spirits and diseases by making paper or straw dolls to which the illness would be transferred before they were cast into the sea or river.

The Boys' Festival in May, Tango-no-Sekku, is symbolized by the Japanese iris, the leaf of which resembles a sword blade, and the carp, because it swims upstream against adversity. The boys receive miniatures of medieval armor, and dolls representing legendary heroes. However, this too had an ancient derivation: in May insects begin to appear and the farmers tried to drive them away by scarecrows, which gradually evolved into great heroes, stressing martial arts.

Wishes for Tanabata were fulfilled in 1955, the dryest nyubai (rainy season) in 56 years. The stars were out and the River of Heaven navigable. In the days of the gods there was a beautiful maiden, Tanabata, who worked at her loom day and night to weave gorgeous fabrics for the gods. The Deity took pity on her and gave her an oxherd for a husband to relieve the tedium of her monotonous life. The weaving princess, now deeply in love, spent all her time with her husband, woefully neglecting her duty. So the Deity made her live apart from him, each on either bank of the River of Heaven (the Milky Way) and permitted the man to cross over only once a year, on the seventh night of the seventh month. So on July 7, Japanese children decorate bamboo branches with gay paper objects, and tie wishes to the branches. (Merchants in the cities use this bamboo branch to advertise sales, so like our Christmas, commercialization spoils the unsophisticated life here also.)

O BON
Festival of the Dead

"The Red Pavilion," a whodunit by the famed Orientalist, Robert Van Gulik, is set in ancient China during the Festival of the Dead, when the Gates of Heaven open so that the beloved dead can be welcomed back by their families.



KODAMATSU

Today in Japan, OBon is still observed with tiny portions of special food, served in special pottery on special little tables, all purchased for the occasion. The new baby and the new bride are introduced to the Honorable Ancestors.

Dai-Mokenren, a great disciple of Buddha, was permitted to see the soul of his mother in the Gakido, the Circle of Penance. He gave her a bowl of her favorite food, but each time she tried to eat, the food would turn into fire and finally become ashes. Mokenren asked Buddha how he may ease his mother's suffering (reputed to be penance for refusing food to priests in her physical life) and was told to feed the shosts of the great priests of all countries "on the fifteenth day of the seventh month." After he had appeased the phantom priests thusly, Mokenren was allowed to see his mother again, dancing for joy. Hence the feast and the dance, Bon Odori.

Of all Japan's festivals, Bon Odori is our favorite. In each neighborhood there has been erected for the occasion a high, red-and-white trimmed platform, with musicians, a traditional drummer to carry the beat, and dance leaders chosen from the older children. B low, round the platform there will be a fairy ring of tiny tots, and then the adults, swaying..."a performance impossible to picture in words, something unimaginable, phantasmal, --a dance, an astonishment." (Lafcadio Hearn)

This year a Bon Odori, sponsored by the Buddhist Church, was held in Riverside Park, New York City, and the Wessons nostalgically attended with some collegiate friends. Our daughter Peko (her Japanese nickname) and Kensei Hiwaki, a Japanese student at Drew University, danced in traditional yukata (cotton kimono) beneath the lanterns. The lante rns read Kikkoman (soy sauce, plum wine), Kirin (beer) and Ajinimoto (monosodium glutamate), but these familiar brand names deepened our nostalgia.

Japan is an island nation, with many rivers and lakes. On the last evening of OBon, the souls are guided back by tiny boats, tens of thousands, each with candle alit. One watches this fantastic fleet of twinkling lights sail off into the blackness and merge with the stars, a beautiful scene which expresses the serene assurance about death that once each year one lives again in the hearts and homes of loved ones.

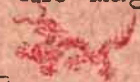
WASHOI!

The summer breeze wafted drumbeats up to our windows, and the chant, "Washoi, washoi." We grabbed our cameras and tracked down the festival. It might have a dashi, a vertical float with a life-size image of the village deity-warrior atop. It might have an OMikoshi, a resplendent gold lacquered portable shrine, originally intended, in the mists of time, to bring comfort to the sick and aged who could not make their pilgrimages, and to purify the outer areas through which it passed. Or it may feature a pyramidal shrine of leaves, ephemeral, to be finally floated out to appease the Sea Gods.

Today much of the original significance is lost, or so it seems as one watches the faces of the sake-sodden youth who bear the shrines on their shoulders, enacting the battle between Good and Evil as the shrine makes its jagged way.

Later, as summer evolves into autumn, the festivals increase. We have only one Thanksgiving; the Japanese have many. Also, there are festivals and rites almost every day of the year, some place in Japan, from the Burial of Broken Needles, to fertility rites in a nation so modern that it has legalized abortion.

And now, I learn, a new one has been added, purely local, I'm sure. On the Bluff in Yokohama, the foreign community, Americans find at their doorstep on Hallowe'en, little ghosts and witches who hold out their bags and chant the magic incantation, "Triku tritu."



(Footnote: 1. Hirohito, Emperor of Japan, by Leonard Mosley.)

(This article was written for the Signpost, monthly magazine of the Women's Club of Glen Ridge. I am no longer a member--but my pastor's wife is Editor. Hence the feminine angle... For FAPA there are other festivals, and in case you think I'm putting you on (I never found any area of Erotica at the World's Fair, Bob!) let me say we have home movies.)

Shimenawa and kodamatsu drawn by HVW, also "calligraphy" following. New Year's Greeting below is a typical Japanese rubber stamp; also the small mochi stamp, if I can fit it into a margin.

You may be fascinated to know that Ts'ai Lun, mentioned in Cradle of the Craft, was rewarded for his inventionof paper with a high title and office bestowed by the Emperor; however, he became involved in an intrigue with the Empress, was detected, 'went home, took a bath, combed his hair, put on his best robes, and drank poison.' (Our Oriental Heritage, by Will Durant) Makes history so human...

THE HAIKU SOCIETY held a meeting at Asia House (E.64th St.off Park Ave., NYC) on Nov. 21, 1968.

HAIKU

Those planning to attend were asked to submit one haiku to be read, anonymously, at the meeting. This promised to be interesting, so I went, dragging Pam along. After another visit to the exhibit of ancient Chinese bronzes loaned from museums and collections all over the world, we settled down with a group of 15 to 18.

Now, my knowledge of haiku is limited to the belief that it should be composed of 17 syllables, it should allude to Nature in some respect, and it might suggest a second, deeper philosophy, though this last is not necessary to me if the haiku provokes a vision, a brief experience mentally, intellectually or what-you-will.

Apparently I am wrong because there were some members present who obviously take haiku Seriously, and they agree that a haiku may be 15, 16, 17, 18, 19 or whatever syllables. This I resist. Where's the challenge?

The haiku which won first prize, a very fine <u>woven</u> Japanese print, didn't send me:

> More intricate
> than all winter's designs,
> this spring flake.

Second place went to Pam's favorite, as we have frogs, hopefully, in our carp pond.

> Not one sound:
> Until we stopped to listen,
> peepers in the pond.

My own favorite was booed down, for the very word that makes it so Japanese in feeling, if you know how formalistic the Japanese are in regard to certain eating/drinking etiquette, as in the Tea Ceremony, in which the drinker also plays his rigid role.

> Squirrel etiquette:
> turn and turn between forepaws --
> nibble, nibble round.

To another: "On velvety cat's paws
The fog crept over the muted, greying sky." I just quoted (or misquoted) Sandburg: "The fog creeps in on little cat feet."

"Breathing evenly
the Hudson humbly obeys
the moon's cold power" brought Pam's whispered remark to me that it sounded like a detergent commercial! (Cold Power)

There was much animated and intellectual discussion on the 5-7-5

(Contd last page)

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Peko's Page—written by Pamela Ynir Wesson for the second Raritan Valley Chappel calendar. Printed by Daddy.

1969, Year of the Cock

in the Oriental Zodiac, is considered a lucky year, because of the five virtues of the Cock. They are: courage in battle; faithfulness in watching for dawn; humanity, because he shares food he has found; military strength from his strong feet; and his comb represents civilization.

People born in the Year of the Cock (1933, 1945, etc.) are intelligent and kind by nature. They are apt to get into trouble with others, and are whimsical or capricious. They are versatile and more fortunate in later years. They are best as artists or doctors.

In Japan, a Cock on a drum symbolizes peace and prosperity, with no cause for complaints. Therefore, 1969 should be an exceptionally good year. Here's hoping that your year will be. *Omedeto!*

Set in 10 and 12-point Kennerley with 12, 24 and 36-point Pascal

C R A D L E & C R A F T

The oldest specimens of the art of printing, dating 674 years before Gutenberg made Occidental printing history in 1445, are preserved in Japan—sutras (prayers) remaining from a job order for one million copies of four different sutras, encased in miniature wooden pagodas. A Chinese blacksmith, Pi Shing, made the first movable type in the world in 1041 A.D. We are indebted to a Chinese, Ts'ai Lun, for paper, made in 105 A.D. using tree bark, hemp and rags, even as today. China made black ink in the 4th Century and red some 500 years earlier. Korea produced cast copper printing type in 1403, the first metal type known to history, half a century before Gutenberg's. —HVW

HAIKU (contd) theory: the first line must have 5 syllables, the second 7, and the last 5. Since I didn't win the "17" argument, I did not debate this, which I regret now because it is the Japanese way of thinking. Japanese thinking is 3 5 7, like the festival of the same name. Japanese, on the other hand, do not like any kind of 4 -- the ideograph being the same as "death," the reason telephone numbers assigned to gaijin (foreigners) are heavy on 4's and 8's.

Nobody could quite figure out this haiku (?):

> The typhoon night a folded lotus
> Dreamed in his arms on Kinkazan ...

"Typhoon" is the dissonant word there," I stated. "During a typhoon there are no dreams, no folded lotus..." Why not lotus, I was challenged. "Because they are busy having their heads battered off," I explained. How about dreams in the quiet of a Buddhist temple..? "With all the shoji rattling?" There is nothing in the world quite as noisy as a typhoon because it is beyond man's power to subdue.

Anyone interested in The Haiku Society, or interested in subscribing to various Haiku magazines, can contact the society through The Japan Society also (250 Park Av., NYC).

It is a Japanese belief that one's span of life is predestined, with all the death dates written in a book. Daily and hourly Shinigami, god of death, consults the book and dutifully calls each person at the proper moment.

> Shinigami reads;
> closing the book he calls you,
> irrevocably.

--HVW