Andreas Riessland
Nanzan University

Festivals, Rituals, and Fish-Shaped Streamers

Changing Perceptions of Japan's Children's Day

For more than 250 years, Japanese families have celebrated the birth of a male heir by hoisting large fish-shaped streamers called *koinobori* (carp streamers) at or near their home throughout the weeks leading up to the boys' festival day (now Children's Day) on May 5. But with recent demographic shifts and changing lifestyles, the tall *koinobori* displays have become noticeably fewer, and with them, public knowledge about this once important ritual and its role in the communal and spiritual life of Japan's families is on the wane. This article seeks to investigate the history of this ritual and its various facets of meaning, along with the changes it has undergone throughout its history and its substantial shift from what was once an outdoor, communal event to a private affair within the confines of the family home.

Keywords: *koinobori*—Children's Day—*tango no sekku*—folk religion—family structures

Asian Ethnology Volume 83, Number 2 · 2024, 333–347

One of the remarkable features of living in Japan is the frequent encounter of seasonal references, be it in poetry, personal letter writing, or in more mundane contexts such as listening to the news or doing the daily shopping. These references come in various forms; they can be food items, songs, or activities associated with a specific period or event in the annual calendar, and which can be purchased, heard, or observed only during or shortly before the event. Many of these references are visual markers, namely images of items that relate to the particular event or season. The number of markers for each of these events or seasons is relatively small, with most of them relating to natural seasonal phenomena such as the *akatombo* dragonfly, the red maple leaf, or the *sakura* cherry blossom. But a few markers are taken from the cultural sphere, and one of these is the event that follows the cherry blossom in the annual calendar, the *koinobori*.

The *koinobori* is the marker for May 5, Children's Day, and once the *sakura* season has officially ended, the ubiquitous depictions of that season's flower quickly give way to images of the three (sometimes two) *koinobori* fish. In the days leading up to Children's Day, the image of these fish, one above the other and all facing one direction, can be found on anything from gift wrappers to shop windows, advertisements, family restaurant menus, local buses, and cake decorations (see figure 1). Not surprisingly, the *koinobori* fish (next to a little yellow or brown pole) are also the Unicode emoji for Japan's May 5 holiday. The objects that gave rise to this seasonal marker, though, the colorful fish-shaped streamers flying from a flagpole high above the roofs of the surrounding houses, are progressively disappearing from Japan's landscape.

With the attention that Children's Day enjoys in the lives of Japan's preschoolers, it is fair to assume that most people in Japan are familiar with the story behind the custom of flying *koinobori* streamers around May 5. But when it comes to the finer details of the *koinobori* display, the meaning of its constituent parts, and its spiritual and sociocultural importance, not much of this is common knowledge anymore. With this in mind, this article looks at the characteristics of the *koinobori*, its historical development from beginnings in Edo's urban society some 250 years ago, its significance in folk religion, and the role that it plays as a tool to reconfirm or realign relations within and between the involved families and the local community.

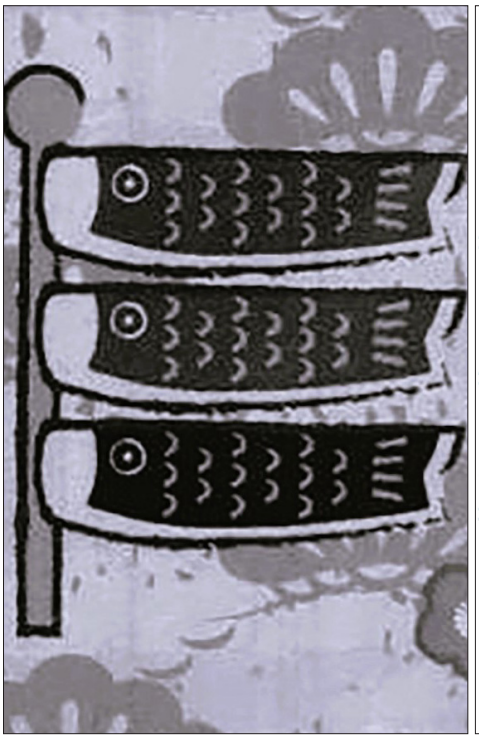

Figure 1. The three *koinobori* carps on a bookmarker. Photograph by Andreas Riessland, 2024.

Figure 2. A present-day *koinobori* arrangement. From top: *dashi* decoration (*kaitenkyū* and *yaguruma*), *fukinagashi* streamer, and the three *koinobori* streamers (*magoi*, *higoi*, and *kogoi*). Drawing by Y. Ito, 2024.

Koinobori: A short description

When displayed as a visual marker, the simplified image of two or three fish in the colors black, red, and blue—or alternatively blue and red—is enough to communicate the seasonal allusion to the festival day of May 5. But with this focus on the fish, other core elements of the *koinobori* arrangement such as the *fukinagashi* streamer and the *dashi* decoration tend to get neglected. These elements are in many respects as important as, if not more important than, the fish streamers, therefore this article begins with a description of a regular *koinobori* arrangement with all its constituent parts.

The *koinobori* set consists of three or more streamers that are shaped and printed to resemble carp (the *koi* in the term "*koinobori*," see figure 2). The wide mouth of these carp streamers is held open with a slender polythene ring so that air can fill out the streamers, before escaping through the loose open tail end. With a string that runs from the mouth, the streamers are tied to a rope that allows them to be hoisted up a flagpole. Until the early 1960s, these *koinobori* were made from paper or, to a lesser degree, cotton (Hayashi 2018, 10), but today's material of choice is light synthetic fiber that allows the carp streamers to fill with air even in a light breeze. They are industrially cut and assembled, and they are printed with weather-resistant

chemical dyes, although a small number of *koinobori* makers still work the traditional way and paint them by hand.

The sequence of the top three streamers never varies, with a large black one, the *magoi*, at the top, followed by the somewhat smaller red *higoi*, and underneath, smaller again, the blue *kogoi*. Today, many *koinobori* sets have an additional number of *kogoi* in diminishing sizes, but for these, there is no determined color regimen. In the Kansai region, a popular variant of the black *magoi* carries an image of a small red boy resolutely holding on to the fish. This is Kintaro, the boy hero from Japan's folk tales.

Above the *koi* streamers is another streamer, the *fukinagashi*. This term translates simply as "windsock"; this streamer is not fish-shaped but consists of either five strips of fabric in five distinct colors, or it is printed with a colorful pattern. Usually, the *fukinagashi*'s seams run only for about half of the streamer's length, so that at the tail end, the fabric strips can flutter freely in the wind. On many of these *fukinagashi*, the head section is left white, with two blue stripes known as *nibiki* or *komochisuji* running around it. This symbol has been in use for a long time, and there are conflicting theories about its meaning, whether it constitutes a fertility symbol, a representation of dragons and rain, or a reminiscence to the parents-and-child trinity (Kitamura 2009, 140). The size of the streamers depends on the available space: the maximum length of today's popular front garden or veranda variants is around four to seven feet, but with the freestanding arrangements that can still be found in the countryside, the *magoi* and *fukinagashi* streamers can easily reach thirty feet or more.

Another essential element of the *koinobori* assembly is the *dashi*, the decoration at the top of the *koinobori* flagpole. The *dashi* has two components: at the very top of the pole, a ball-shaped pinwheel made from several gold-colored blades rotates around its vertical axis. This is the *kaitenkyū*. Underneath it are the *yaguruma*, two pinwheels whose wings resemble feathered arrowtails. Usually, the *yaguruma* are also gilded or in a color combination where gold and red predominate. Today's *kaitenkyū* and *yaguruma* are usually made from polythene or aluminum.

A wooden or light metal pole and a set of rigging lines complete the standard *koinobori* arrangement. Apart from a few local variants of the *dashi*, the *koinobori* setup is the same throughout Japan: three or more *koi* streamers hoisted on the pole, above them the colorful *fukinagashi* streamer, and on top of the pole the spinning *dashi* pinwheels. So what, then, is the link between hoisting carp-shaped streamers and the May 5 holiday? To figure this out, it is helpful to look at the origin of this holiday, and at the changes it underwent.

History of the *koinobori*

Until recently, the festival day we know as Children's Day (*kodomo no hi*) was celebrated under a different name that related back to the holiday's origin in China's cultural sphere. It was (and occasionally still is) known as *tango no sekku*, a seasonal holiday (*sekku*) to mark the first day of the horse (*tango*) in the month of the horse, namely the fifth day of the fifth month. Along with the other *sekku* holidays in the annual cycle, it had arrived in Japan around the Heian period, where it merged with indigenous seasonal festivities. In accordance with the lunisolar calendar that was in use in Japan

until 1873, the date of this holiday was about a month later than it is today, around the first half of June when the rice shoots were ready to be transferred to the rice paddies, one of the key events in the annual agricultural cycle. Also, this was the time just before the onset of the rainy season with its oppressive heat and humidity, and its potential damage to people's belongings and to their health. Accordingly, *tango no sekku* served as an event to prepare for the coming inclement weather; to ritually purify the house, its inhabitants, and their possessions; and to show due respect to the kami so that the community and everything it owned, and most of all the coming harvest, would be under the protection of their benevolent influence.

With the rise of the warrior class in the Kamakura period, this festival underwent a fundamental change in character. The erstwhile protection and purification rites were now joined by the warrior nobility's practice to entreat the kami specifically for the protection of their male offspring, on whom the perpetuation of their lineage depended (Kitamura 2009, 137). In order to give the kami an appropriate welcome and to offer them a suitable abode for the duration of the festivities, the clan's banners and halberds were erected at the family residence, many carrying an ornamental decoration at the top where the kami could settle and grace the festivities with their presence (see figure 3). In addition to offering the kami a resting place, this display of heraldry and weapons on or in front of the family estate also signaled to the surrounding community and any passers-by that this house had recently been blessed with a male heir.

Around the middle of the Edo period (1603–1868), this custom of publicly announcing the blissful state of the family began to be adopted by Edo's wealthy bourgeoisie. But as commoners were prohibited from displaying status markers such as the nobility's crested banners or weapons, they had to find ways to offer the kami a similarly impressive seat while not raising the ire of the authorities.[1]

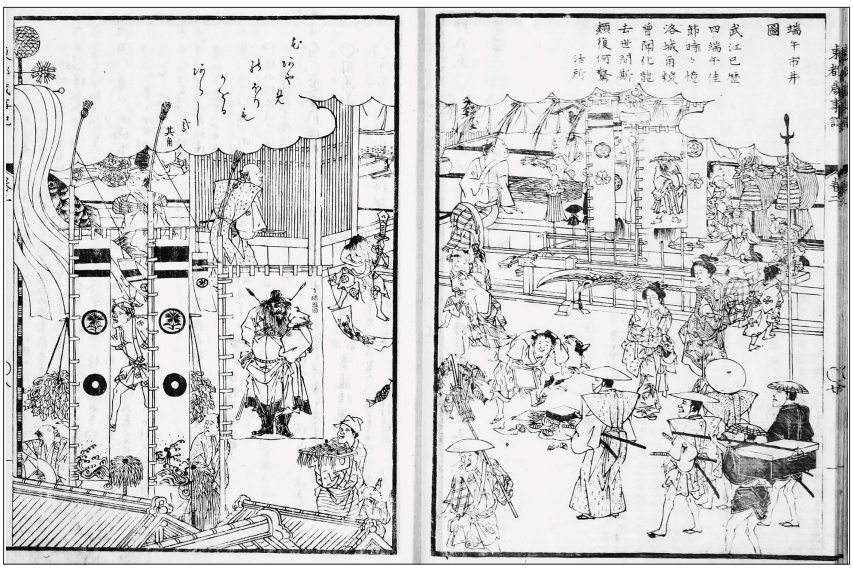

Figure 3. Edo streetlife with celebratory decorations for the *tango no sekku* holiday. Source: Gesshin Saitō and Settan Hasegawa, *Tōtō saijiki*, Edo (Tokyo): Suharaya Ihachi, 1838.

Figure 4. The *shōki* flag. The triangular shape at the top left represents the bat. Photograph by Andreas Riessland, 2012.

One item that gained popularity around that time was the *shōki nobori*, a flag that carries the image of a stocky and muscular warrior with a thick black beard (see figure 4). This is Shōki (Pinyin: Zhōng Kuí), a figure from Daoist mythology, powerful vanquisher of demons and protector from evil. His clothing and the shape of his sword indicate his Chinese background, and he is usually depicted in a martial pose, battle ready, as he viciously pummels a markedly smaller red demon, or as he glares at a bat that approaches from the distance. Shōki's association with the bat goes back to a proverb that plays with the homophones "luck" and "bat" in Chinese, saying that Shōki gets angry when the bat/luck is late—a discreet encouragement to luck not to take too long to appear. Particularly in the Kantō region, *shōki nobori* can still be seen today, alongside the *koinobori* set.

For commoners, these *shōki nobori* were an uncontentious way of emulating the nobility's rituals. They had a distinctly martial quality, but with Shōki's character as a protective deity and his obvious Chinese origin, the authorities had no reason to restrict the display of his images. Accordingly, if mid-to-late Edo illustrations are anything to go by, *shōki nobori* were frequently employed in the city's *tango no sekku* celebrations. The first drawing of such a flag is found in the *Zokukiyoganna*, a collection of poems from 1745 (the year Enkyō 2). An illustration in this book shows *nobori* for the *tango no sekku*, although it is not clear whether they belong to a nobleman's household or that of a rich commoner. In this illustration, we see a flag with the two auspicious *nibiki* stripes and a stylized wave and one with the *shōki* motif. The other decorations for the occasion are also striking, the distinctive *higekago* basket at the top of the pole and, tied to the top of the crossbars of the flags, several small pendants known as *maneki*: an additional small flag, and a streamer shaped like a fish, the earliest currently known image of this kind.

As later Edo-period illustrations show, *shōki nobori* and the nobility's crested flags retained their visibility in town (see figures 5 and 6), but with time, the *koi* became progressively more prominent. In the later Edo period, the small fish-shaped appendage in the *Zokukiyoganna* had become a black *magoi* of substantial length,

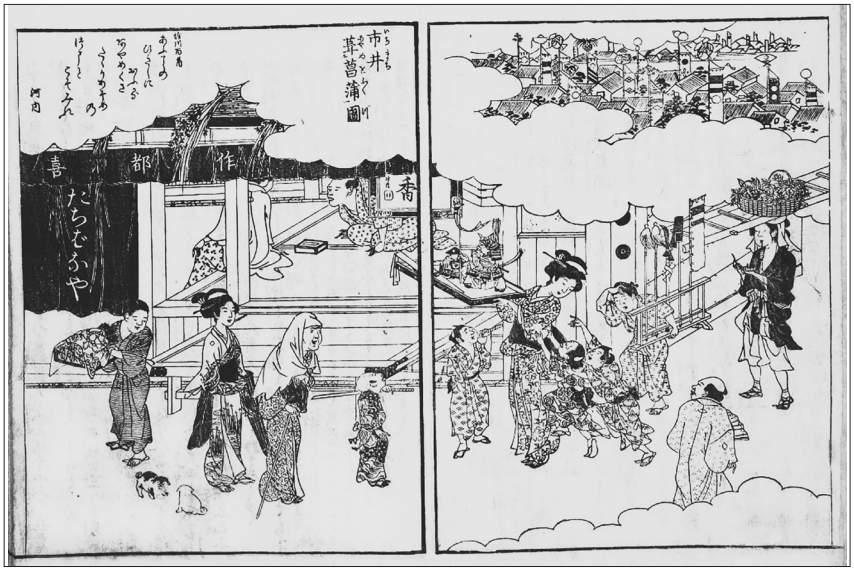

Figure 5. *Tango no sekku* celebration in the mid Edo period (1806). Source: Shungyōsai Hayami, *Nenchū gyōji taisei*, vol. 4, Kameyama: Sudajūemon, 1806.

fluttering from its own pole, highly conspicuous above the city's rooftops (see figure 7). The *koi* could now also be seen as a motif on other flags for the *tango no sekku*, as a powerful fish resolutely fighting its way up a waterfall (Kitamura 2009, 23–28).

The common explanation for the significance of the carp on this day relates to the Chinese folk tale of the carp that attempted over and again to swim up the river rapids at the Dragon Gate (Pinyin: Lóng mén; Jp.: Ryūmon), and when it finally succeeded, turned into a dragon. With the popularization of this legend in Japan, the carp from the Dragon Gate increasingly came to symbolize vitality, perseverance, determination, and ultimate success, and thus became a projection screen for everything that one wanted for one's child to achieve in life.

In the Meiji period (1868–1912), the custom of hoisting carp streamers had established itself countrywide, but from 1872 on, the number of *koinobori* displays

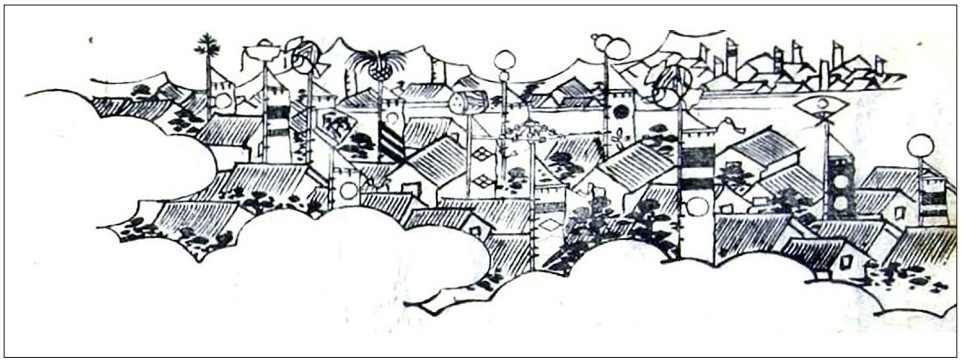

Figure 6. Closeup of the background of fig. 5. Crested flags of the nobility with various objects as *dashi* at the top, to celebrate *tango no sekku*. Source: Shungyōsai Hayami, *Nenchū gyōji taisei*, vol. 4, Kameyama: Sudajūemon, 1806.

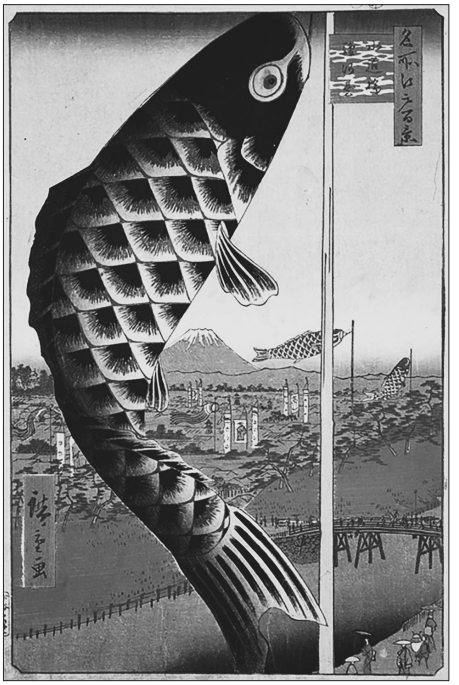

Figure 7. *Suidobashi Surugadai*, woodblock print by Utagawa Hiroshige. *Magoi* streamers of the late Edo period (1857). Source: Utagawa Hiroshige, "One Hundred Famous Views of Edo," 1857. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/One_Hundred_Famous_Views_of_Edo

particularly in the cities dropped considerably. The reason for this sudden change was the formal abolition of the *sekku* holidays in this year, and it was not before 1894 that this custom was revived countrywide. Soon after, the black *magoi* came to be joined by a smaller red *higoi* (Ueda 2014, 3–6). Why this second carp streamer appeared and what it originally stood for is no longer known. With the popular 1931 children's song "Koinobori" that was sung in schools all over the country, the role distribution of the *koi* was also settled for good: the large *magoi* represented the father, and the smaller *higoi* stood for the son. In the postwar period, the *higoi* came to represent the mother, while the role of the son was now given to a newly added third fish, the *kogoi*. Around the time of the Tokyo Olympics, the number of *koi* rose further to an average five streamers, but according to Hayashi Naoki (2018, 10), the popular story that this was inspired by the five Olympic rings is an urban myth. Rather, the rise in the number of *koi*, with one for each of the family's children, is said to be due in equal parts to the changing perception of family roles and to the marketing skills of the *nobori* manufacturers.

It has already been mentioned that in the Kansai region, there is a *magoi* variant with a vermilion child clinging to it, the boy hero Kintarō. With this image on the *koi*, two folk tales intertwine: the *magoi* still stands for the story of the carp at the Ryūmon rapids, but this is now linked to the tale of Kintarō, who, among many other heroic deeds, distinguished himself by battling with and defeating a giant carp. Both components of the *nobori*, the *koi* as well as Kintaro, are thus a visual expression of the wish for a bright and successful future for one's own son. Kintarō's deep red body color is attributed to the formerly widespread belief that vermilion was an effective remedy against the periodically rampant smallpox. The red Kintarō, just like the frequently red Shōki images, comes to express the desire to see the child protected from this disease (Kitamura 2009, 137–38). With the disappearance of such folk beliefs, the perception of Kintaro is also changing. In today's Kansai region, most people would still be able to identify the little red boy on the *magoi* as Kintarō, and many would still be familiar with the story of Kintarō's struggle with the big *koi*. But hardly anyone would probably know much about the protective qualities of Kintarō's

vermilion hue. And as with Kintarō, so it is with the rest of the spiritual rationale behind the *koinobori* display: much of it has disappeared from common knowledge.

The spiritual aspects of the *koinobori*

The custom of displaying distinctive decorations for *tango no sekku* in front of or next to the baby boy's home served several purposes:

- it answered to the expectations among the local community and the family of what is right and proper to do,
- it publicly communicated the family's wishes for their offspring's bright and successful future, based on the popular folk tale of the carp fighting its way up the Ryūmon rapids and becoming a mighty dragon, and
- it served as an invitation to the divine powers, offering them a locale to settle on and bless the event with their beneficial and protective influence.

The first two functions are still relevant with the *koinobori* display, but the spiritual dimension plays a much-diminished role in the public perception of the Children's Day celebrations. How little of this remains can be seen in *koinobori* seasonal markers on consumer goods (see figure 1): often, they focus on the carp streamers and neglect the two other essential parts of the *koinobori* arrangement, the *fukinagashi* streamer and the *dashi* decoration on top of the mast, the two elements that in spiritual terms are the more important ones.

In the *koinobori* ensemble, the main site of divine presence is the *dashi*, the assembly of pinwheels on top of the hoisting pole. They serve as a *yorishiro*, as an object that represents the seat of a divine power. They are one among the many ritual objects of Japanese folk belief that are used on festive occasions to provide the kami with a temporary abode high above the heads of the revelers, from where they can witness the festivities in their honor and exert their beneficial influence. A variety of objects can be raised as *yorishiro*, such as woven baskets, fabric or paper ornaments, bundles of tree branches, or the flashing pinwheels on top of the *koinobori* assembly.

With the small scale of today's *koinobori* sets for the urban front garden, visualizing the *dashi*'s spiritual quality becomes difficult, but at the foot of one of the impressively tall *koinobori* in the countryside, where high above the pinwheels are flashing in the sunlight, it is much easier to picture them as a seat of divine power. In the Kumamoto area, as well as in Ibaraki or Fukushima (see figure 8), the heritage of this spiritual quality is yet more apparent, as the pole decorations there are closer in design to the seats of the divine that the warrior class deployed during the Edo period (see figures 3, 6, and 7). The Kumamoto variant, which with an overall height of about forty feet is the tallest in Japan, carries several indications of its character as a *yorishiro*. Underneath a short flag with the child's name, the pole tip has a single *yaguruma* wheel, together with a bundle of evergreen branches and a large basket made from split bamboo with numerous long, loose bamboo strips hanging from it. In Japanese folk religious contexts, such bundles of evergreen branches are often employed as a *yorishiro*, conspicuously so in several of the festival floats for Kyoto's Gion Matsuri (Soejima 1995, 156). Kumamoto's unusual bamboo basket serves a similar function.

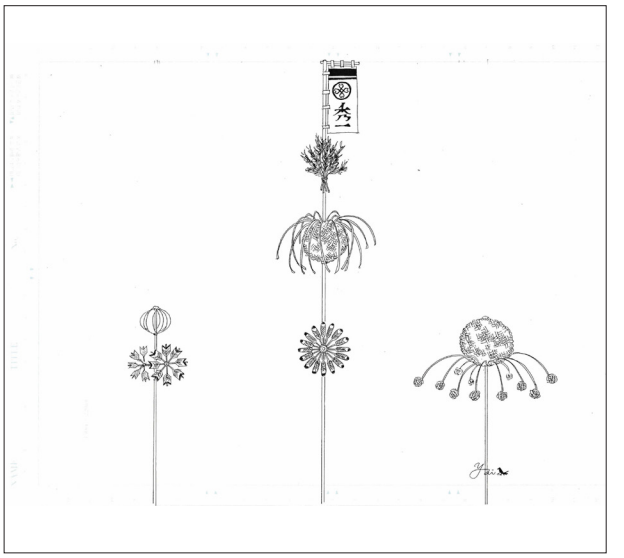

Figure 8. Present-day dashi styles. Left: customary *dashi* with *kaitenkyū* and *yaguruma*. Middle: Kumamoto-style *dashi* with top flag, evergreen branches, *baren* basket, and single *yaguruma*. Right: Ibaraki-style dashi, a large *kagodama* basket. Drawing by Y. Ito, 2024.

Locally, it is known as a "*baren*" (commonly written in katakana), but the generic term for this is "*higeko*" or "*higekago*" ("beard basket"), due to its "beard" of hanging bamboo strips.[2] In Ibaraki and Fukushima prefectures, one comes across similar baskets used as *dashi*, the *kagodama*. Here, split bamboo is woven into a large spherical basket with long bamboo strips protruding, each of these strips carrying small woven bamboo ball at the tip.

During the Edo period, these baskets were a popular tool for offering the kami a temporary abode, and throughout the festivities, they were the spiritual focal point of the festive decorations. In figures 3 and 6, they can be seen on top of the flags that the warrior nobility had put up in front of their residences to celebrate *tango no sekku*. As Ueda Nobumichi (2014, 6–8) points out, *koinobori* displays also carried *kagodama* instead of the *kaitenkyū* until at least the end of the nineteenth century. But in today's *koinobori* assemblies for the balcony or the front garden, this spiritual aspect of the *dashi* plays a very marginal role, and the *kaitenkyu* and *yaguruma* on top of the pole represent little more than an entertaining detail, turning merrily in the breeze.

This also applies to the *fukinagashi* streamers; they too carry a more complex meaning than is generally perceived today. According to the traditional layout, a *fukinagashi* should consist of strips of fabric in the following five colors: blue, white, red, black, and yellow. This color combination goes back to the Chinese doctrine of the five elements (Pinyin: *wǔxíng*; Jp.: *gogyō*) and represents perfection in the interplay of the five virtues. The wish to secure the very best of luck for the newborn also plays a role here, through the hope that the five essential virtues should interact as harmoniously in the child's life as the interplay of colors suggests. Today, however, such notions hardly ever play into the choice of *fukinagashi* design, and regarding their color and pattern, a considerable proportion of *fukinagashi* no longer have anything to do with the complexities of the five-element doctrine. This also holds true for the

nibiki, the two blue stripes around the head of the *fukinagashi*; their purpose to invoke fertility or the dragons' presence has also been lost from common knowledge.

The one element in the *koinobori* setup that seems to have no connection to the spiritual world is its main defining feature, the *koi* streamers. But with the unique character that the carp's story takes on in Japan, the question needs to be asked whether there isn't more to the *koi* than just the tale of the carp at the Ryūmon rapids. After all, artists in China have reproduced the carp-at-the-rapids motif for centuries (see figure 9), but I have yet to come across any carp-shaped streamers like Japan's *tango no sekku* displays.

For ethnologist Kitazawa Masakuni, there is no doubt about the spiritual quality of the *koi* streamers. To him, *koinobori* are in a category with the wind-driven fixtures that the warrior class used in battle, such as *fukinagashi*-style streamers or the windblown capes of the medieval cavalry known as *horo*. In all of these items, says Kitazawa, the spirit of *araburu megami* ("the raging goddess") was believed to be manifest, and through them the warrior nobles hoped to secure the protection of this goddess of war. Also, together with the catfish, the carp was regarded as an embodiment of a powerful earth and water deity, whose presence and protection were also invoked by hoisting *koinobori* (Kitazawa 1995, 135ff.). It should be critically noted, though, that Kitazawa does not provide any proof to support these assumptions, and his theories, however plausible, remain purely speculative.

Figure 9. Late seventeenth- or early eighteenth-century plate with carp and dragon motif. National Palace Museum, Taiwan. Photograph by Andreas Riessland, 2024.

The *koinobori* in a social context

In Japan, purchasing a *koinobori* set and gifting it to the child is an act of great interpersonal and interfamilial importance. Also, the public display of *koinobori* at or near the child's residence is prone to cause a reaction from the local community that directly impacts the concerned family's position in this community. This reaction can vary greatly, depending on the particular local situation.

On the one hand, there is the difficult issue of trying to follow this custom in a contemporary urban setting. Hoisting a set of *koinobori* is a highly visible statement directed at the local community (and beyond) about this particular family's domestic situation, namely the fact that this family has been blessed with a son and heir. Yet in the relative anonymity of today's *manshon* and *apāto* neighborhoods, the *koinobori*'s public message about the family's internal affairs meets a society where this message is at best irrelevant if not outright unwelcome, as shown in the many instances where the rulebook of the home owners' association expressly prohibits the display of *koinobori* on the outside of the building.

In village or small-town societies, on the other hand, or in urban areas where long-term residential interaction has fostered a close-knit network of interpersonal relationships, the situation is markedly different. Here, familial events such as a wedding or the birth of a child are of significance not only for the involved families but also for the wider community of neighbors and local acquaintances. Leaving aside the profound disruption that such an event poses for the lives of those directly affected, it also offers the involved families a rare opportunity to consolidate or readjust their position within the competitive arena of local hierarchies. In this respect, the birth of the oldest son and future heir to the paternal family line is particularly important, and the *koinobori* deliver a very efficient tool to achieve the wished-for publicity on this occasion. Their primary function is to visibly convey the family members' pride and joy over this happy event to the greater community. But on another level they also speak about the relationship between the involved families, their respective positions within the local community, their attitudes toward local customs and traditions, and, given the high cost of purchasing the *koinobori*, also about their financial situation.[3]

In view of this, it becomes understandable why this issue is of such significance to the two involved families. According to custom, it is the family on the mother's side who takes care of the *koinobori* set. They purchase it and present it to the baby boy. This is a crucial act in the two families' ongoing effort to balance out the relationship between them. To understand the full scope of this, it is helpful to take a look at the relational framework of the two families' relationship.

With the 1898 Civil Code, Japan's lawmakers had decreed that all matters concerning the arrangement of the nation's households should be conducted in accordance with the precepts of the *ie seido*, an adaptation of the former samurai class's patrilineal and paternalistic system of family organization and succession rules (Linhart 1984, 546; Danwerth 2012, 100). Within this system, the decision-making power over all matters concerning the household lay with its male head, who was also legally responsible for anything that happened within this household. As the family's primary heir and its future head, the family's oldest son, his wife, and their children lived at the family residence together with his parents, and it was his

(or primarily his wife's) responsibility to ensure that the parents were well taken care of in old age. For the wife, marrying an oldest son meant taking on his surname, moving into his family home, and submitting to his mother's authority in all matters concerning the household and to his (or his father's) decision-making authority in everything else, including all matters concerning their children. Formally at least, her relationship with her own blood relatives came to a virtual standstill.

With the 1947 revision of Japan's Civil Code, the legally binding status of this system came to an end. Also, the continuing urbanization and the spread of the nuclear family further weakened its predominance in Japan. However, in many areas of society, particularly those where the family comprises the primary economic unit (such as agriculture or the country's many family-run businesses), the paternalistic, patrilineal household model continues to represent the social norm.

But even under the prewar system, the rules of family adherence were rarely ever enforced as strictly as the letter of the law suggested. Local communities amended the body of government laws with their own informal conventions and frequently accommodated inheritance arrangements where the heir's task of maintaining the *ie* fell to younger siblings or other relatives, or to nonrelated individuals who would be adopted into the family (Goldfarb 2019, 184–85). Also, in the case of marriage, they would often grant the bride's side of the family, in particular her parents, a modicum of involvement in the affairs of her married life. Many of these conventions are still in place today, including those concerning the purchase and gifting of the *koinobori*.

In general, it is the grandparents on the mother's side whose responsibility and privilege it is to purchase the *koinobori* streamers and to present them to the baby boy. For the father's side of the family, this gift to their future heir is a clear statement from the mother's kin that they, too, have a viable interest in the wellbeing of both mother and child. What is more, the *koinobori* gift is also a useful tool for conveying to the husband and his relatives (and, with the public character of the *koinobori* display, to the wider community) one's view about the relationship between the two families.

Assuming that the two families are on reasonably amicable terms, a suitably generous *koinobori* present will be a helpful asset in deepening the friendly relationship between them. If, however, issues relating to status or a mutually competitive mindset were to play into the relationship between the two families, then this offers an opportunity to at least partially subvert the societal framework of the *ie* system. The *koinobori* are a gift from the grandparents to the grandson (not to his parents), and to not acknowledge the present and not hoist the *koinobori* at the boy's residence would be perceived as a serious breach of social protocol. With this, the *koinobori* gift offers a handy tool in the two families' competitive relationship; it does not matter whether the gift happens to be distinctly substandard or inappropriately lavish, the intended message about this relationship will be open to witness by everyone, both within the two families and in the wider community.

However, this last, very confrontational scenario describes an approach that would be at best rare and exceptional. It is safe to assume that in most cases both sides interpret this gift with a more amicable focus on its many positive connotations: as a contribution by the mother's side of the family to the child's happiness, as a public expression of joy over the birth of a baby boy, as an appeal to the kami to bless this

child with their benevolent and protective powers, and as a gentle reminder that the mother's parents also have a vital interest in participating in, and contributing to, the healthy life and upbringing of their grandchild.

Conclusion

In 1948 Japan's May 5 holiday was amended to include all children, but the day's prior denotation as a holiday for boys is still very much in place today. This is evident in the items and activities that mark this seasonal festival, such as the carp-shaped streamers used to celebrate the birth of a family's male heir. As a seasonal marker and graphic design element, they are still very much in use. But with the changes in Japan's demographics and in the lifestyle patterns of its people, the actual custom of displaying the *koinobori* is increasingly moving indoors, with room-size versions taking the place of the traditional large outdoor ones. Consequently, the purpose of the *koinobori* is also undergoing fundamental changes, as one of its primary intentions, the public celebration of the family's male offspring, is becoming redundant. In Japan's towns and villages, the tall poles with their distinctive streamers and pinwheels are less and less frequently seen these days, and along with them public consciousness of their ritual, spiritual, and social significance is also in decline. To counter this trend, the members of the Nihon Koinobori Kyōkai, Japan's association of *koinobori* manufacturers, strive to keep this culture alive. But as the growing number of small-scale and indoor variants on their sales pages show, they are well aware that the *koinobori* custom is increasingly losing its public character and turning into an indoor, private affair.[4]

Until today, a large conspicuous *koinobori* display is a powerful public statement, particularly wherever the old *ie seido* structure is still a relevant factor in social and familial relationships. But attitudes in society continue to change, and with today's reduced-size *koinobori* sets the grandparents can meet their expected familial duty at a much-reduced cost. So even where the family's property size would allow for a large *koinobori* display to be set up, there is clearly less incentive for them to do so than in earlier times. It remains to be seen whether this erstwhile important custom will survive, or whether it will develop into an anachronism that only a tradition-conscious and wealthy minority is willing to hold on to.

Notes

1. According to Ueda (2014, 3), these prohibitions affected not only commoners but also a large number of lower-ranking members of the warrior elite.

2. For a detailed discussion of the *higeko* baskets in the context of Japanese folk religion see Orikuchi 2006.

3. The average cost for one of the professionally mounted large-scale *koinobori* sets that still dot the countryside in spring is above one million yen.

4. In the public sphere, the *koi*-shaped streamers can still be encountered in the mass displays that have started to appear throughout the country. Here, preferably above a riverbed in or near town, hundreds of streamers are hoisted on long steel cables that cross the river valley below.

But the purpose of these municipally organized displays is mainly to enhance local tourism; they do not serve any particular social or spiritual purpose.

Author

Andreas Riessland is a social anthropologist living and working in Japan. His research interests include aesthetics and nationalism, the development of national consciousness in prewar and postwar Japan, and patterns of juvenile delinquency in Japan. At present, he is an associate professor in the Faculty of Foreign Languages, Nanzan University, Nagoya.

References

Danwerth, Christopher. 2012. "Principles of Japanese Law of Succession." *Zeitschrift für Japanisches Recht* 33: 99–118.

Goldfarb, Kathryn E. 2019. "Beyond Blood Ties: Intimate Kinships in Japanese Foster and Adoptive Care." In *Intimate Japan: Ethnographies of Closeness and Conflict*, edited by Allison Alexy and Emma E. Cook, 181–98. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Hayami Shungyōsai. 1806. *Nenchū Gyōji Taisei* [Comprehensive compilation of annual events]. Vol. 4. Kameyama: Sudajūemon.

Hayashi Naoki. 2018. "Koinobori no rekishi" [The history of *koinobori* (carp streamers)]. In *Koinobori zukan: Omoshirosōni oyoideru* [*Koinobori* illustrated guide: Swimming playfully], edited by Nihon Koinobori Kyōkai, 6–12. Tokyo: Shogakukan.

Hiroshige, Utagawa. 1857. "One Hundred Famous Views of Edo." https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/One_Hundred_Famous_Views_of_Edo

Kitamura Katsushi, ed. 2009. *Edo no noboribata: Shomin no negai, eshi no waza* [Edo *no bori* banners: The wishes of the common people and the skills of the artists]. Tokyo: Shibuya Kuritsu Shōtō Bijutsukan.

Kitazawa Masakuni. 1995. *Saijiki no kosumorojii: Toki no koe o kiku* [The cosmology of seasonal events: Listening to the voices of time]. Tokyo: Heibonsha.

Linhart, Sepp. 1984. "Familie." In *Japan Handbuch*, edited by Horst Hammitzsch, 546–60. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag.

Orikuchi Shinobu. 2006. "Higeko no hanashi" [The story of the *higeko* (beard basket)]. *Aozora Bunko*. https://www.aozora.gr.jp/cards/000933/files/18393_22337.html

Saitō, Gesshin, and Settan Hasegawa. 1838. *Tōtō saijiki* [Chronicle of seasonal events in the eastern capital]. Edo (Tokyo): Suharaya Ihachi.

Soejima Akiko. 1995. "Kami no yorishiro no ki, sakaki" [The sacred tree of the gods: Sakaki]. *Shokubutsu no Sekai* [The world of plants], 77: 156.

Ueda Nobumichi. 2014. "Koinobori no hensen ni kan suru kōsetsu: Meiji 20-30 nendai no jidō zasshi o chūshin ni" [A study on the evolution of Koinobori: Focusing on children's magazines from the 1880s to 1890s]. *Kenkyū Kiyō* 47: 1–10.s