

Kisetsu: The Japanese Sense of the Seasons

“You are so lucky to be visiting our city at this the most beautiful time of the year.” This statement, or one very like it, featured in every welcome speech delivered to us during our visit to Kyoto in November. Most of the guidebooks and tourist brochures I consulted before I left concurred: ‘The shrines and temples of Kyoto look stunning against a backdrop of blazing leaves.’¹ A mild autumn meant that we were a few weeks early for the full splendour of Kyoto’s autumn colours but a few early-turning acers (Japanese maples) gave a good indication of the delights about to spread through the region’s forests and gardens.



Whilst I arrived armed with rolls of Fuji film to capture Kyoto’s most photogenic season, I was not prepared for the extent to which the changing seasons pervade every aspect of Japanese life. In the UK we can look forward to shops making some effort to dress their windows for Christmas. Many even manage a few eggs, chicks and bunnies for Easter. But these displays focus on a particular festival and are designed primarily to get us to part with more money, rather than to celebrate the changing of



the season. In Japan, autumn leaves and colours were evident in almost every public arena. Restaurants served pickles and prawn crackers shaped like maple leaves on placemats with autumn leaf motifs, confectioners offered sweets shaped like chestnuts and mushrooms, and the vending machines on the streets featured plastic twigs of autumn leaves draped decorously over the brightly-lit soft drinks and cigarettes. Just about every promotional leaflet or brochure featured a cover designed to reflect the current season. Why does a nation where 77% of the population live in urban areas have such a fascination with the changing of the season?

Like many features of modern Japanese life, the answer to this question seems to be rooted in the past. In ancient times the Japanese developed a sophisticated system of wet rice farming. In this process, seeds are sown in the spring, and the rice seedlings are then transplanted to paddies in the early summer. They grow rapidly under the summer sun and bear grain, which is harvested in the autumn. ‘This cycle was repeated in exactly the same way for many centuries, and as a result, agriculture was the centre of all life in ancient Japan and people were greatly concerned with the seasons and the climate, living throughout the year in accordance with rice-growing schedules. The modern Japanese have inherited these attitudes from their ancestors, which is why the seasons are still closely connected with contemporary Japanese life, and this sense of the seasons has had a great influence on Japanese lifestyles, annual events, and literature.’²

¹ Lonely Planet Japan – C Rowthorn et al (2005)

² The Japanese Mind – Ed. by R Davies & O Ikeno (2002)

Only a tiny proportion of Japan's 127 million people are still directly involved in the cultivation of rice but all of them, it seems, like to be reminded of the ways the islands' physical geography has helped shape their culture and identity. And if their busy urban lifestyles prevent them from seeing the harbingers of spring or autumn for themselves, the answer is simple: bring the changing seasons into the city. Hence the autumn leaves in every shop window, bento and vending machine.

Luckily, our study tour allowed us to see the chrysanthemums and ginkgo trees in all their glory and to bring home jagged red maple leaves pressed in our journals. We even got to stay beside Lake Biwa, the inspiration for Fujiwara no letaka's autumn haiku:

When the moon lights up
the sea of Grebes
fall shows itself
even in the flowers
of the waves.



Having enjoyed autumn so much, I hope one day to return to Japan in the spring to follow the *sakura-zensen* ('cherry blossom front') as it works slowly northwards. I will not be surprised if my hosts in Kyoto greet me with the words: "You are so lucky to be visiting our city at this the most beautiful time of the year!"

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