

# Kyoto's Gion Matsuri

## -Community and Communication in an Ancient City Festival-

Rui Shen

(Stephen Richmond せみ)

### 1. Introduction

In Japan, an enormous number of traditional *matsuri* (festivals) have been observed since ancient times, and many have continued right up until the present day. In Japan, *matsuri* have their origins in Shinto and Buddhism, and usually held by a local shrine or temple with various activities and parades, as these are the two main religions in Japan.

Different *matsuri* tend to reflect different local cultures, and have great cultural value. In 1979, as "one of Japan's best three *matsuri*", as reported by the website *Japan-guide.com*, Kyoto's Gion Matsuri was chosen as one example of Japan's important intangible cultural heritage, and thus was guaranteed permanent protection. The Matsuri is an extremely important event in the culture of Kyoto and wider Japan, bringing individuals together and playing an important role in spiritual and cultural communication. In this essay I would like to discuss how Kyoto's Gion Matsuri, an ancient festival, influences local communities, interpersonal communication and intercultural communication in the present day.

### 2. A Brief History of the Gion Matsuri

As one of Japan's three most popular *matsuri*, the Gion Matsuri of Kyoto is an annual event which initiated from Yasaka Shrine (formerly known as Gion-Sha), from where the event begins every year. The entire downtown area of Kyoto is involved, including the organizers and people who participate in making sure the *matsuri* runs smoothly with support

from the local government, the businessmen in the city selling *matsuri*-related goods, and spectators who come to join the *matsuri*. The Gion Matsuri lasts for the entire month of July, during which time numerous activities are held. The highlight of these is the grand parade of the 32 decorated floats (*Yamaboko Junkō*) on the seventeenth.

Back in 869 when Kyoto was the capital of Japan, a series of epidemic plagues originated in the city and spread all over the country. Japanese people at the time believed that *Gozu-Tennō*, the epidemic god, caused the plagues; this deity functioned as a god of the spread of epidemics from early Heian period. To try and restore clam to his nation, the emperor dispatched a special messenger to Yasaka Shrine to appeal to citizens to pray for the immediate end of the terrible plague. Furthermore, 66 *hoko* (halberd spears) were prepared, which represented the 66 regions in Japan at the time. The *hoko* were used during the rites and performances for the epidemic gods, and were destroyed afterwards. Roemer describes the role of the *hoko* as follows: "The destruction of the spears symbolized the eradication of the disease-causing deities. Afterward, *Susano-o Mikoto* was paraded around in a *mikoshi* (portable shrine or sacred palanquin) to purify the area and the people of Japan" (187). The rites were practiced every time a plague broke out, because people believed that such rites could expel the epidemic spirits. Eventually, the *matsuri* became an annual event, and has been held every July since 970.

However, in 1476, Kyoto's Gion Matsuri

was discontinued because of the Ōnin war and was not resumed for about twenty years, until the year 1496. According to Masao Kawashima's study, "The renaissance of Kyoto's Gion Matsuri after the Ōnin war was managed by the Muromachi Shogunate" (5, my translation). Since then, the matsuri has become more like a civic festival than an authoritative event. "The Gion Matsuri, which was organized and maintained by *machishu* (important local business men in the Muromachi period), was securely placed as the most important event symbolizing city self-government (Hayashi quoted in Kawashima, 5, my translation).

After thousands of years' gradual transformation, today's format of the matsuri basically resembles its form in the Edo period. During the matsuri, the *hoko* spears, which were originally used at inchoate rites to destroy evil spirits, are replaced by the matsuri's primary attraction - thirty-two meticulously decorated floats known as *yama* and *hoko*. At the time, the rich merchants were absorbed in decorating the floats luxuriously, and paraded them around the city on the 17th of July in order to show off their wealth. Although today the decorated floats are no longer used to show off an individual's wealth but rather for cultural value, the tradition of the decorated floats and other matsuri customs continued.

### 3. Involved Communities and Organizations

As the parade of decorated floats became a core event of the Gion Matsuri, a head organization was needed to manage the distribution of labor, activities, float preservation and such matters, and so the Gion Matsuri Floats Federation was established in 1923. "The primary tasks of the floats federation are, 1. overseeing the drawing of lots to determine the order of the parade. 2. equal distribution of resources. 3. resolving issues by calling together

the heads of the disparate thirty two groups taking part in the matsuri. The Federation does not take part in negotiations, but instead acts a communication hub between members (Sasaki, 13, translation S. Richmond).

Today, the modernized city has made it harder and more challenging to arrange every detail of the matsuri. Electrical wires that can be seen everywhere in the city have made it difficult for floats to pass through some streets during the parade, and moreover, "Every year on the 17th, more than 200,000 people crowd the streets of downtown Kyoto to watch the main parade of the Gion Festival" (Roemer, 491). Accordingly, ensuring the safety of spectators and visitors is one of the most important issues for organizers. Also, there are other issues such as the use of street area and traffic control, which require the federation to negotiate with local authorities to get the government support and help to ensure the success of activities during the matsuri, especially the parade of decorated floats. Moreover, recruiting volunteers, and solving issues such as garbage collection, lack of public toilets and any related complaints from the local residences are also parts of the federation's job.

Within the Gion Matsuri Floats Federation, there are 35 float preservation associations in downtown Kyoto, each preserving a different kinds of floats. According to Waseda University student Takeshi Sakaki, "There are thirty-two decorated floats being used today, while the other two are no longer in use" (12, my translation). Roemer quotes that the area as a whole is referred to as the "yama and hoko neighborhoods" (187). Each association is responsible for the assembly, maintenance and operation of their float. According to Henan University associate professor Zonghua Chen, "Such preservation associations are non-governmental, as they are the main organizations in charge of such cultural

protection. These groups rely completely on the personal pride and respect (of the members towards their leaders and the group itself) and traditional customs to operate the associations. Participation is on a voluntary basis, and the required funds are donated from local residents" (24, my translation). This system provides the preservation associations with excellent autonomy, as the government has no direct control. The activities during the matsuri can be completely decided by the associations.

The main function of the associations is to host the matsuri, and to decorate the floats they are in charge of, in order to take part in the *Yamaboko Junkō* on the 17th. Generous financial support is important in order to make sure the floats are ready for the parade. According to China's University of International Business and Economics' student, Rong He, "The governmental subsidy for *hoko* is about five million yen per year, and about 1.2 million to 1.3 million yen for *yama* per year. However, over fifteen million yen is needed for the decorated floats during the matsuri" (34, my translation), so the rest of the money needs to be raised by the associations themselves. They are also responsible for advertising the matsuri and their own decorated floats (such as making their own posters and websites), decorations, selling souvenirs, and making sure things run smoothly during the matsuri period.

Only the current thirty-two float preservation associations are allowed to participate in the Gion Matsuri of Kyoto, and the selection of members of the associations is also quite strict. The members are mainly local residents from the float neighborhoods, rarely accepting people from outside the neighborhood, and people whom are involved are quite proud of their membership in the associations. According to Chen's interview of Takafumi Imanaka, a PhD candidate from the Graduate University for Advanced Studies at Japan National Museum of

Ethnology, "it is an honorable thing to become a member of a float preservation association. Until now, Imanaka is still proud that he was accepted by the association fifteen years ago, which was a special case because he is not originally from Kyoto" (24, my translation). However, being a member of a float preservation association is not only about honor but also shouldering the responsibilities and commitments involved in maintaining the traditions of an ancient festival such as this.

In the same way as Imanaka, most of the members of the associations are part timers. Outside of the matsuri period, they have their own work or businesses, but they are all extraordinary active while the matsuri is held. As mentioned above, the selection of the members of the associations was extremely strict, requiring that members were born and raised in the particular float neighborhood. However, in some recent cases the situation is different; "...for example, today nearly all of the float-carts are pulled by young men from other neighborhoods, cities, and (even) countries" (Roemer, 192).

After thousand years of transformation, today, the Gion Matsuri and its correlations are still changing, along with the social development and people's concepts, although sometimes the change is minuscule. Therefore, how to preserve folk cultural heritage appropriately is an important issue. The Gion Matsuri, as an significant example of folk cultural heritage, is being well preserved by the local organizations, along with legal and administrative support from the Japanese government.

According to Japan's Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties, Article 35 and Article 87,

**Article 35: Subsidy for Management or Repairs**

Where an owner of an object of 'Important Cultural Property' or its managerial body is unable to bear

significant expenses required for the management or repairs of such property, or where any other special circumstances exist, the Government may grant a subsidy to the said owner or managerial body to cover part of such expenses.

2. Where a subsidy under the preceding paragraph is granted, the Commissioner for Cultural Affairs may, as a condition thereof, issue any necessary instructions regarding the management or repairs.

3. Where the commissioner for Cultural Affairs deems it necessary, he may direct and supervise the management or repairs of an object of 'Important Cultural Property' for which a subsidy is granted under paragraph 1.

**Article 87: Preservation of 'Important Intangible Folk Cultural Property'**

Where the Commissioner for Cultural Affairs deems it necessary for the preservation of 'Important Intangible Folk Cultural Property', he may himself produce the record thereof and take any other appropriate measure for its preservation, and the State may grant a subsidy to cover part of the expenses required for its preservation to a local government or any other person deemed appropriate to take care of its preservation.

2. The provisions of Article 35 paragraphs 2 and 3 shall apply *mutatis mutandis* to the subsidization under the provision of the preceding paragraph" (*Law for the Protection of Cultural Property*).

As mentioned above, the government appropriation for *hoko* and *yama* is about five million yen, and about 1.2 million to 1.3 million yen each per year. Besides financial support, the local government provides sufficient police

strength to maintain public order, medical workers in case of emergency medical treatment, and other logistical concerns such as temporary changes to public transportation. For the inheritance and continuation of this matsuri, the support from the government is just as important as the work of float preservation associations.

#### 4. Intercultural Communication

As Japan's former capital, and today's well-known historical and cultural city in Japan, Kyoto is considered the birthplace of Japanese culture and most likely has a great influence on the culture of other Japanese regions. In the case of Kyoto's Gion Matsuri, its great influence on other regions' matsuri can be found nationwide. "Among Japanese matsuri which involve have extravagantly decorated floats, most of them are influenced by Kyoto's Gion Matsuri" (Yamajyo, 96, my translation). Some local examples of this are the Kameoka Matsuri in Kameoka, Kyoto Prefecture and Otsu Matsuri in Otsu, Shiga Prefecture.

Kyoto's Gion Matsuri is an archetypal Japanese matsuri, with nationwide influence. Nevertheless, foreign elements and intercultural influences can also be found during the matsuri. As for exotic elements on the decorated floats, using the decorations on *kankoboko* (one of the 32 decorated floats used in the parade) as an example, the *maekake* (apron), as shown in Figure 1, is named Mont Saint-Michel, and depicts a scene of the world heritage church in Normandy, France. Two *dokake* (slip-guards), as shown below in Figure 2 and Figure 3, are also examples of visual culture from foreign countries. The example in Figure 2 is named *Umenitorafumu*. It is a cotton carpet from the Joseon Kingdom in 17th century Korea. Figure 3 shows a Chinese rug called *Tamanitoru*

*shishibun*. Tokoro describes the international influence on the matsuri's decorations as follows:

"The decorations used on the *yama* and *hoko* floats, such as the front and side overhangs and decorative cords, are mostly of the local Nishijin-ori type- representative examples of Japanese dyeing and weaving craftsmanship. But a closer look reveals articles from Joseon Korea, Ming and Qing China, and even from India, Persia and Belgium" (179, translation S. Richmond). Exotic cultures have influence on this traditional Japanese matsuri, and Japanese have neatly integrated foreign cultures into local traditional culture. This is one clear example of diverse cultures interacting with each other. "The parade of decorated floats of the Gion Matsuri can certainly be called a display of 'moving galleries and museums' as it combines the character of both exoticism and internationalism" (Yamajyo, 92, my translation). The parade of decorated floats is a chance for foreigners to praise the beauty of traditional Japanese culture, and at the same time is also a chance for Japanese people to learn something about foreign culture within their local culture.



Figure 1: Mont Saint-Michel



Figure 2: *Umenitorafumu*



Figure 3: *Tamanitoru shishibun*

The *maiko* (an apprentice *geiko* but different from *geisha*) is one of the symbols of Japan in the international arena, and also is a symbol strongly associated with Kyoto. The *maiko* image can be found everywhere in the city, such as on postcards, posters, cosmetics, and other products. Today, there are very

few real *maiko*, and they can rarely be seen ordinarily. The *maiko*'s performance is one important cultural aspect of Kyoto that attracts tourists from both inside and outside of Japan. It's interesting to note that the *maiko*'s elegant performance is quite different from the massive, lavishly decorated floats of the Gion Matsuri, and it gives expression to the tranquil and elegant side Kyoto's traditional culture. These cultural icons of Kyoto represent an interesting binary—the masculine, powerful Gion Matsuri against the feminine, refined *maiko* performance.

Since the Meiji Restoration (from the 1860s to 1880s), under the influence of Western industrial civilization, Japan started modernizing and changing certain aspects of its culture from traditional Japanese style to a more Western-based one. One of these is the way Japanese people dress. Today, most Japanese people can be seen on the streets wearing Western-style clothes, and it is rare to see people wearing traditional Japanese kimono. However, during the period of Gion Matsuri, people wearing *yukata* (a casual summer kimono) can be seen all over downtown Kyoto. For the new generation of Japanese people, although they tend to be more used to wearing Western-style clothes than traditional Japanese clothes, the effect of the traditional matsuri has driven enthusiasm for the latter. The sartorial effect of the matsuri is not only on local Japanese people, but also to foreigners in Kyoto. A large number of foreigners can be seen walking on streets in *yukata*, in order to more fully experience traditional Japanese culture during the matsuri period.

## 5. Interpersonal Communication

As mentioned in Section Three, the selection of the members of the associations involved in the matsuri is quite strict, and the members are mainly local residents from

the float neighborhoods. These people usually participate until old age prevents them from taking part. After years of working together, the relationships between the neighborhoods people who are deeply involved in the festival tend to become more like relatives or families. Roemer's interview of people from a matsuri neighborhood provides proof of this:

“When I asked Mr. Nomura if he was “friends” (*tomodachi*) with the other members he replied, “more like friends, hmmm, I guess relatives (*miuchi*), or like close friends (*nakama*) and colleagues (*dōryō*) [better describes] these neighborhoods. [He concluded,] We are all like relatives.” When I asked three men from another neighborhood if they consider themselves friends, the Head (*Rijichō*) immediately replied, “[w]e're more than friends,” and he described their relationship as more family-like because they spend so much time together.” (191).

It is the festival that brings the communities together, and promotes interpersonal relationships within the neighborhood and the preservation associations.

In the past, people believed that in terms of religious festivals and rites, females were impure and could bring bad luck, and since the parade were as a ceremony to expel the epidemic spirits, it became a tradition that females were forbidden to participate the parade of decorated floats. However, nowadays a number of *Yamahokocho* (preservation society) no longer forbid women from the parade. “The situation has been improved so that as a lot of *hoko* are open to females, after the Kankoboko first allowed a female to climb to the top of *hoko* during a matsuri after the Second World War” (Yamajyo, 107, my translation). The liberation of free female's rights to participate in the parade has had a great positive influence on female's

role in the matsuri, and it can now be said that Kyoto's Gion Matsuri is a matsuri that truly belongs to (all) the community.

## 6. Conclusion

A chief reason that Kyoto's Gion Matsuri has been carried on from generation to generation is that it has been established as an integral part of the lives of local people for over one thousand years. The enthusiasm for the Gion Matsuri has never waned over this time.

Both the Gion Matsuri Floats Federation and the Floats Preservation associations play important roles in making sure the matsuri runs smoothly every year. The Gion Matsuri could not be held as scheduled without their support. The financial and administrative support from the government is also indispensable. The effective cooperation between civil organizations and government is one of the key reasons why Kyoto's Gion Matsuri has stood the test of time.

In modern society, the role of Kyoto's Gion Matsuri is different from that of the past, which was as a ceremony to pay respect to the gods in order to get rid of impending ill fortune. Today, the matsuri plays the role of communicative bridge between individuals and cultures.

As one of Japan's historical cities, Kyoto has formed its local culture through over a thousand years of transfer and integration of foreign cultures into its local culture. The world is constantly changing, and through the ancient matsuri, the combination of traditional culture and modern civilization are well reflected. At the same time, the matsuri has a great and continuing influence on cultural affect and propagation, both domestically and internationally.

The influence of the Gion Matsuri is not only cultural, After years of working together, the relationships between people deeply involved in the festival naturally tend to become close,

and the old prohibitions of disallowing females to participate in the parade of decorated floats has since been relaxed, so that co-operation and communication between the sexes has instilled new elements into Kyoto's Gion Matsuri.

As I have detailed in this paper, within the long history of Kyoto's Gion Matsuri, individuals and cultures have interacted with and depended on each other in a nexus of communication, with the matsuri at its core.

## Works Cited

- Brumann, Christoph. "Outside the Glass Case: The Social Life of Urban Heritage in Kyoto." *American Ethnologist* 36.2 (2009): 276-99. Web. 20 Nov. 2014.
- "Bunkazai Hogohō." *Nihon Hōrei Sakuin*. N.p., n.d. Web. 27 Nov. 2014.
- Chen, Zonghua. "Preserving Intangible Cultural Heritage in Daily Life - Taking Japanese Immaterial Folk Cultural 'Gion Festival' as an Example." *Journal of Nanjing Arts Institute (Fine Arts & Design)* 1 (2011): 23-26. Web. 16 Nov. 2014.
- He, Rong. "Ribei Jisiwenhua Tanxi." *Wangfang Data* N.p., 30 Nov. 2012. Web. 12 Oct. 2014.
- "Japanese Festivals (Matsuri)." *Japanese Festivals (Matsuri)*. N.p., n.d. Web. 03 Jan. 2015. <<http://www.japan-guide.com/e/e2063.html>>.
- "Kankoboko | Kankoboko No Kakasohin." *Kankoboko / Kankoboko No Kakasohin*. N.p., n.d. Web. 2 Dec. 2014. <<http://www.kankoboko.jp/keshouhin/doukake.html>>.
- Kawashima, Masao. *Gionmatsuri: Shukusai No Miyako*. Tōkyō: Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 2010. Print.
- "Kyoto Gionmatsuri." *Kyoto Gionmatsuri*. N.p., n.d. Web. 23 Nov. 2014. <<http://www.gionmatsuri.jp/>>.
- "Law for the Protection of Cultural Property." *UNESCO Cultural Heritage Laws Database*. UNESCO, n.d. Web. 3 Jan. 2015. <<http://www.>

unesco.org/culture/natlaws/media/pdf/japan/japan\_lawprotectionculturalproperty\_engtof.pdf>.

"Public Interest Incorporated Foundation Gion Matsuri Yamaboko Rengokai." *Public Interest Incorporated Foundation Gion Matsuri Yamaboko Rengokai*. N.p., n.d. Web. 23 Nov. 2014. <<http://www.gionmatsuri.or.jp/>>.

Roemer, Michael K. "Ritual Participation and Social Support in a Major Japanese Festival." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 46.2 (2007): 185-200. Web. 23 Feb. 2014.

Roemer, Michael K. "Shinto Festival Involvement and Sense of Self in Contemporary Japan." *Japan Forum* 22.3-4 (2010): 491-512. Web. 23 Feb. 2014.

Sasaki, Takeshi. "Nagakutsuzuku omatsuri no jyoken — Gion Matsuri wo rei ni — ." (2008): 1-23. 2008. Web. 28 Feb. 2014.

Tani, Naoki, Masaya Masui, and Hiroshi Kyôgoku. *Machi Gionmatsuri Sumai: Toshi Sairei No Gendai*. Kyôto-shi: Shibunkaku Shuppan, 1994. Print.

Tokoro, Isao. "Yasakajinja No Gionmatsuri." *Kyôto No Sandaimatsuri*. Tôkyô: Kadokawa Shoten, 1996. 113-89. Print.

Yamajyo, Toru. *Kyôto Kankôgaku*. Kyôto: Hôritsu Bunkasha, 2007. Print.

Yoneyama, Toshinao. *Gionmatsuri: Toshi Jinruigaku Kotohajime*. Tôkyô: Chûo Kôronsha, 1974. Print.