



OIDEYASU!

THE CHARM OF A KYŌTO SUMMER

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The rainy season didn't last very long this year. It started a few weeks earlier than the predicted date and then quickly ended before I even had a chance to decide whether I should invest in long rain boots.

Summer in Kyōto is infamous and so is the saying by Kyōtolites: "Kyōto is a special place, because the summer is hot like a sauna and the winter is bone-chilling cold." They always smile when they say this. In guidebooks, Kyōto is described as being situated in a basin, surrounded by mountains. A confectionery owner in the Ōmiya Shotengai (shopping street) said, "If this is your first summer here in Kyōto, let me warn you: Don't go outside during the day if you can help it. The scorching sun just sucks out your energy. For me, I always feel ill in the summer. Do you know *natsubate*? It means you have no energy, no appetite, and you feel downright exhausted. I shed pounds by the day in August."

I didn't need her to tell me. I was already apprehensive about the rainy season when the futon sheets stuck to my back as I rolled over from the heat. I often debated endlessly whether I should turn on the air conditioner. Two things prevented me from flipping on the switch — wanting to save energy following the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami, and hearing from Japanese friends that turning the AC on and off actually causes "cold stomach" — a sure cause for *natsubate*.

Various summer discomforts such as shoulder, neck, back or knee pain are sometimes explained spiritually through a term called *gaki*. These hungry, flesh-eating ghosts express their desire to be fed by laying menacing aches upon a person. In order to appease these ghosts, a small altar is set up with a little ladder on the side for the ghosts to climb up and devour the food that has been laid out.

Because Kyōto summers can be excruciating, prayer festivals such as the famous Gion Matsuri, with its many *yamaboko* (festival floats) that are pulled throughout the streets attempt to please the gods. On the floats, participants chant and ring bells to pray for good health and safety and to ward off sickness or diseases throughout the long summer. In mid-August, the Obon festival, with its lighted paper lanterns hanging in temples or floating down rivers, is said to be a spectacular scene.

What I have thus far heard about the deep summer of Kyōto has not been very positive. Indeed, it is muggy and uncomfortable. I have never sweated as much as I do while standing in my kitchen, cooking over the Japanese-style, two-plate gas burner. One day, however, when the humid temperature rose to nearly one hundred degrees, I took a cool shower after eating dinner drenched in sweat. The light fan air felt good on my wet hair. Sitting in my lounge chair next to the garden on a still night, I opened a cold can of beer, filled a small frosty glass and gulped it down.

Suddenly, my wind chime tinkled. It was a very light, barely audible sound and brought to mind a television documentary I had seen about a woman who traveled from the southern Japan island of Shikoku to Tōkyō during summer, selling her hand-made wind chimes. There are only

a few craftsmen like her left, she said, because most people buy their wind chimes from larger stores. She took extra pride in her wind chimes being crafted with the lightest of materials that could react to even the gentlest breeze. She had been doing this work for over thirty years, but had never tired of hearing the crisp tinkling of her chimes. The anticipation of hearing even a single tinkle in the middle of a warm summer



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night brought a small sense of coolness.

The next day, as I rode my bicycle in the scorching sun, I saw a little girl no more than 3 years old sitting in her tiny plastic pool in front of the neighborhood sake shop. She looked simply joyous as her grandmother gently sprayed her with a garden hose. I don't know why, but I felt a bit cooler just watching her.

I have spent many summers in Japan, but Kyōto's summer has a charm all its own. Surrounded by greenery, I awake to the cacophony of the mating songs of the cicadas. At first, the loud cry that starts early in the morning and lasts throughout the day was an unpleasant earful. But after hearing that these creatures live underground for about five years and then come out only once during the summer to sing their mating call, lay their eggs and die, I no longer had the heart to wish their silence.

Rather than thinking of the heat as a nuisance,

I decided to simply enjoy Kyōto's summer in all its small and delicate ways. Whenever the heat becomes unbearable, like today, with the cicadas blaring with gusto and the wind chime so very silent, I close my eyes and think of these scenes of summer in Kyōto:

- Shaved ice over a ball of sweet, red *azuki* beans, and a scoop of vanilla or green tea ice cream slowly melting over a generous portion of fruit cocktail drenched in homemade black sugar syrup;
- Listening to the delicate sound of water slowly trickling through a bamboo faucet into a small pond;
- The gentle sway of hanging bamboo curtains in front of the open *genkan* (entrance) to a *machiya* (traditional wooden house);
- A small neighborhood festival in the shopping street as children, elders and shop owners cheer on the carrying of the small shrine through the streets;
- Elderly shop owners sitting outside their stores, burning the pungent mosquito repellent *katorisenkō*, slowly fanning themselves while watching passersby, enjoying a periodic breeze;
- The slow *geta* (Japanese wooden platform shoes) footsteps of the rice shop owner returning home in the quiet still of night after having a few drinks of sake at the small neighborhood *yakitori* (grilled skewered chicken) bar;
- A bite of cool, sweet watermelon sold at the small mom-and-pop fruit stand run by an elderly couple in front of their house;
- The wives of farmers carrying loads of fresh Kyōto summer vegetables straight from their small fields — tomatoes, eggplants, cucumber, corn, onions, green beans, peppers and, sometimes, wild strawberries that taste sweeter than candy. Wearing big straw hats, they busily wrap the vegetables in newspaper, giving 5- or 10-yen discounts, returning change with their rough, parched hands. Housewives clutching white parasols congregate around a small peddler's truck, chatting mindlessly about the heat as they shop for their vegetables;
- The glistening flow of the Kamo River and ducks lazily floating by.

This is summer in Kyōto.

Jackie J. Kim lives in Kyōto with her husband. Kim is the author of "Hidden Treasures: Lives of First-Generation Korean Women in Japan." While living in Japan as a JET teacher and later as a graduate student, she interviewed elderly Korean women who had immigrated to Japan. Those interviews led to the publication of "Hidden Treasures." If you're wondering about the title of Kim's column, she explained that "Oideyasu!" means "Welcome!" in Kyōto ben, or dialect. You can share your comments with Kim by e-mailing her at jackiejkim@hotmail.com. HH

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