

A Historical Walk Around Kyoto



Photo by Ryotaro Nakajima

Gion Festival with *Chimaki*

Gion Festival is one of the three largest festivals in Japan. It is a large-scale festival that starts on July 1st and continues for the whole month. This parade, held on July 17th, is the highlight of the Gion Festival.

History

In the 8th – 9th centuries, many people died from epidemic diseases in Kyoto. Ancient citizens were very scared because they believed that epidemic diseases were caused by vengeful feelings of the people who had died violent deaths, the mythical epidemic god, or an evil spell cast by *Gozutenou* (a guardian deity) with the ability to expel diseases in Japan. Ceremonies and festivals came to be held in each place to drive away evil spirits and appease them. In 869, Gion festival originated from a festival for the guardian deity which was the most popular with the citizens.

Decorations

Citizens believed that dolls, trees and other objects could be possessed by spirits. The tops of the floats, treated as vehicles of the spirits, are therefore traditionally decorated with dolls, trees and various objects. Tapestries hung on all sides of the floats are not only made in Japan but also in China, Belgium, etc. The tapestries are woven in the motifs of western stories such as the Trojan War. Most of them were made in the 14th – 16th centuries.

Music

In the festival, people play the original Gion festival music with instruments such as whistles, drums and bells on the floats. The music is greatly influenced by *Noh* plays.

Gion Chimaki Charm Against Evil

When you walk around Kyoto, you may happen to find Chimaki charms which are put at the entrance of houses. *Chimaki* generally indicates rice dumplings wrapped in bamboo leaves. However, during Gion Festival, *Chimaki* without dumplings is also available as a charm against evil. It is customary to decorate homes with this charm until the next Gion Festival.

By *Etsuko.M*