

Special Report: School Meal Program**Cultural Flavors Spice Up Japanese School Meals: A Perspective from Vietnamese Dietitians
No. 3 in a Series**

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Cultural features create a unique identity for each country and one of the ways it expressed is through the foods we eat. We learn about our culture from many sources and school meals are no exception.

In Japan, school meals designed not only to provide children with healthy and delicious meals but also to teach children about cultural traditions. This broad perspective on food and nutrition helps instill in children a sense of gratitude for the food they are eating and an appreciation for and interest in its origins. In addition, it is likely responsible for the remarkably low levels of food waste.

Japan places a high value on food and nutrition education in schools, and correspondingly also on the professionals who provide this instruction to students. Food culture is one of the aspects of food and nutrition education conducted by nutrition teachers/school dietitians working in tandem with teachers of other subjects. For seasonal events, they plan special meals to celebrate, which are called “Gyouji shoku” in Japanese. Along with the meal for the event, they also tell some story or draw some cartoons to explain drop the meaning of that day and the reason for eating that particular food.

As an example, Ms. Sumida, a co-author of this

article who is a nutrition teacher in a city in the western part of Japan, used the school lunch for the study of the Japanese traditional observance of Setsubun - Midwinter Day and Tanabata – The Star Festival. She developed menus and the kitchen staff prepared appropriate meals. She explained the cultural history of those days through the cartoons shown below.

“As a society with long traditions, Japan enjoys many traditional festivals and observations in the course of the year. As in other countries, these days are marked by the preparation of special foods and the school lunch program often incorporates these dishes into its menus on these days, both for their traditional cultural significance and to acquaint students with foods that they might not otherwise eat often” Ms. Sumida says’

Setsubun - Midwinter Day

Setsubun is the day before the beginning of spring in Japan. It is also New Year’s Eve by the lunar calendar, which begins the year with the first day of spring. On this day, the Japanese perform a ritual to cleanse away all the evil of the previous year and drive it away.



Photo 1: Lunch on Setsubun at Ms. Sumida’s school.


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Conversation between teacher and students at Setsubun lunch time

Teacher: Today is February 3. Do you know what day that is?
Students: It is Setsubun.
Teacher: Yes, it is the New Year's Eve Festival by our old calendar.
So do you know why we throw soybeans at demons on this day?



Students: ???
Teacher: Demons are evil.
Students: Yes, but why are they evil?
Teacher: In the old days, people believed that all sorts of bad things, such as sickness, storms etc. were caused by demons.



Students: Why do we throw soybeans at demons and why we put the heads of sardines and holly at the front door?
Teacher: Demons dislike the strong smell of grilled sardines. People believed that good spirits dwelt in soybeans and demons are afraid of them.




Photo 2: Holly and sardine heads (Drawings by K. Nagao and N. Sumida)

Tanabata - the Star Festival

Tanabata is one of Japan's five traditional seasonal festivals. Tanabata originated from a Chinese legend, was brought to Japan in the 8th century and

is held on July 7th every year. The cartoon below was prepared to tell a story of two lovers which was the origin of this day and also to explain the special food for Tanabata.

Orihime, daughter of the emperor of heaven, wove beautiful clothes by the Milky Way. *Hikoboshi*, the cow herder, lived on the other side of the Milky Way. They were very hardworking.



The emperor of heaven arranged for *Orihime* to meet *Hikoboshi*. When the two met, they fell instantly in love with each other and married shortly after. However, once married, they forgot their work and started playing.



"Since *Orihime* did not weave, clothes became old and tattered. Please tell her to make new clothes as soon as possible!"
 "The cow got sick because *Hikoboshi* didn't take care of it!"
 Everyone came to complain to the emperor of heaven.



In anger, the emperor of heaven separated the two lovers: "You two should live separately in the East and West of the Milky Way!" said to *Orihime* and *Hikoboshi*. Since then, *Orihime* kept crying every day and said "I want to meet *Hikoboshi*. I want to meet *Hikoboshi*."



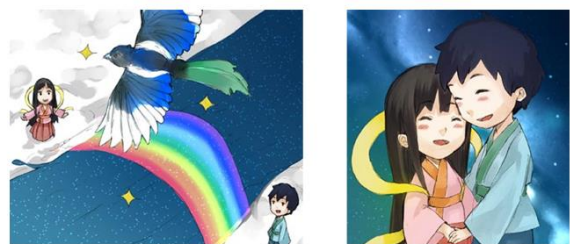
The emperor of heaven was moved by his daughter's tears and permitted them to meet once a year, on the night of July 7th. After that, *Orihime* and *Hikoboshi* came back to work hard and looked forward for the day when they could meet each other.



On the night of July 7th, *Orihime* and *Hikoboshi* came running until they reached the banks of the Milky Way River. However *Orihime* could not cross the river.



Suddenly, a flock of magpies appeared from nowhere and made a bridge so they could reunite. However, if it rains, it is said the Magpies don't come and the couple have to wait another year.



As the date approaches, people wrote a wish on a long, narrow strips of colorful paper, then hang on bamboo branches. The bamboo branches go straight to the heavens and when it is shaken by the wind, it makes a rustling sound, seems like the wish is transmitting to the heavens.



Photo 2: Tanabata story



Photo 3: Special food for Tanabata

When we heard this story, we found it very interesting. In Vietnam, we also have this holiday but the story about it is a little different and there is no special food like Somen. These stories and illustrations make the meals more attractive. Children will enjoy the food more and not let it go to waste. Learning about the legends of the holidays in this way helps children to associate the stories and the food and to remember them more easily. At

the same time, it is also a fascinating topic for family conversation at home.

Integrating culture into school meals is a really good way to educate children. Meals with stories not only nourish children's bodies but also enrich their minds. Through cultural inclusion and nutritious choices, schools will pave the way for a healthier next generation.