

Shichiseki no Sekku (Small Bamboo Festival)

Shichiseki (shichi means “seven” and seki means “evening”) originally referred to a star festival held on the evening of the seventh day of the seventh month of the lunisolar calendar. In ancient China, there was a legend that Hikoboshi and Orihime crossed the Milky Way with a magpie’s help and met only once a year on the night of the seventh day of the seventh month. In the Chinese court, there was an event called Kikkouten, in which women prayed to the stars for improvement in their sewing skills. Kikkouten was combined with the star festival of Hikoboshi and Orihime, and became the Shichiseki event. This was introduced to Japan during the Nara period (710-794).

When Shichiseki was introduced to Japan, it became associated with Tanabatatsume who appeared in Japanese mythology. Since then, Shichiseki has been read as Tanabata. During the Heian period (794-1185), Tanabata became an evening event in which people enjoyed elegant games such as writing waka poems on paper mulberry leaves, making a floral arrangement, smelling incense to judge the variety, and playing the Japanese football game. The Reizei family in Kyoto known as a group of waka poets still holds Kikkouten on the seventh day of the seventh month of the lunisolar calendar in a special arrangement that has continued since the Heian period.

In the Edo period (1603-1867), small bamboo decorations for the Tanabata Festival became popular at small private schools in towns, and gradually spread throughout the country. Since then, children have played the main role in the event, but it must be stressed that the story of Orihime and Hikoboshi, which has been transmitted since ancient times, is the origin of Tanabata.

