

THE JAPAN MAGAZINE

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JAPANESE CHERRY BLOSSOMS

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JAPANESE CHERRY BLOSSOM

THE Japanese word for flower or blossom is hana, and the same word is used for " nose " ; for as the nose is the most prominent part of the face, so the blossom is the most conspicuous feature of a tree or plant. Now, the word hana when used without qualification in Japan always means the cherry blossom a clear indication that the cherry is the most prominent flower the nation knows. The ancestors of Japan from the remotest times were accustomed to call the cherry blossom hang kuwashi Sakura, or the beautiful flower of the cherry, showing how favorably they were: impressed by its appearance. A favorite pillow-word for evening up the measure in poetry was the phrase, "sakura flower of flowers," and so the other familiar phrase, kono-hama, always meant the cherry blossom. In short the cherry was the flower of Japan, as compared with all other mere blossoms. So exquisite a creation of beauty naturally in time came to be impersonated; and Japanese history is run through as with a golden thread by such phrases as konohana sakura hime, or the Cherry Blossom Lady. From Japanese mythology it would be easy to show that from the beginning the cherry flower became a symbol of the Land 'of the Rising Sun, because of their mutual loveliness. In the oldest Japanese anthology, the Manyoshu, there are numerous references to the beauty of the cherry blossom. In the year 412 the Emperor Ingyo composed a poem on the fair cherry blossom and dedicated it to his beautiful consort, the Lady Sotoori, a copy of which may be read in the JAPAN MAGAZINE for April, 1910.

The origin of the word sakura, or cherry, is itself suggestive; for it comes from the root, saku, to sprout or bloom. The word sakabae means flourishing, or successful. It will be seen therefore that the word sakura has influenced the language and life of the nation, being associated with all that is beautiful, prosperous and happy. Sake, the national wine, is also from the same root, having the same effect on the body as the sight of the cherry blossom on the eye. Thus wine, woman and the cherry blossom have gone together as suggestive of beauty and happiness in Japanese history and civilisation. All the classical literature of Japan is full of references to the cherry blossom as emblematic of everything ideal in connection with Japanese life and character. The poet Motoori in an exquisite stanza says

Shikishima no
Yamato-gokoro wo
Hito towaba
Asahi ni niou

Patna-salcura-bans !

(If any one desires to know the heart of Japan, let him gaze at the blossom of the mountain cherry, exhaling its fragrance in the morning sun.)

And so the Japanese proverb says; The cherry is the first among flowers as the samurai is the first among men.

From very early times the cherry was made an object of devotion by the Imperial Court. Feasts were given under imperial auspices in honour of the blossom and poems composed in admiration of its beauty. From this originated the flower-viewing parties that are still a pleasing feature of Japanese society in the spring time. Sakura gari, or cherry hunting, is a custom observed by rich and poor alike, when all go out in crowds to pic-nic under and admire the filmy-misted petals. The children are taught to admire the cherry blossom from earliest infancy, and at least one day in the year will be rocked to sleep under its opal beauty. That the cherry blossoms have a moral influence on the Japanese the people themselves have no doubt. The regent Yoshifusa has a poem which makes reference to one whose heart was purified by gazing at the cherry tree in full bloom.

The cherry is simple in colour and odour, and harmonizes well with Japanese conceptions of what is dignified and Japan is a land of blue sky and clear water, a land of gaiety and openness. The cherry blossom adorns with equal propriety retired recesses and populous quarters. It blossoms in later spring when the days are overcast and lukewarm, a season of flower-time cloudiness. At night the modest moon shines through the misty air on the still purer mist-world of cherry blossoms, and all is suggestive of mildness and calm. Through each day the rugged angles of nature are bathed in a soft pearl cloud of bloom. Like human life, its season is brief and then it passes away as cheerfully as it came. It suggests that cleanliness and purity which every true Japanese loves and lives. Like the true man it is ready to die when the time comes, and is as fair in death as in life. Thus the cherry blossom has ever been a symbol of loyalty, its fair form ever adorning the sword of the samurai, and proving a favourite symbol everywhere.

About the cherry all Japanese cherish sentiment unknown to people of the West. In the ancient days when the Emperor resolved to remove the Imperial capital from Nara to Kyoto, the order was given to transplant the beautiful trees that bore double cherry blossoms, but the people of Nara were so displeased that they raised a great agitation, which only pleased the Emperor, who had not realized the extent to which the people loved their cherry blossoms. Great men have been known to offer prayers to Heaven that the life of the cherry blossom might be prolonged in season. When the maker of sweet meats wants to make a dish that will sell well he calls it sakura-mochi, sakura-dako, or some name associated with the cherry, for then no one can resist trying it.

