

Go-Tochi Boom: We Love Local

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Rediscovering Local Culture

Nowadays, thanks to advances in transportation and communications technology, you can easily obtain the same information and merchandise no matter where you are. Such ubiquity is an indication of how widely things are becoming standardized. Still, Japan’s distinctive local cultures are as robust as ever.

Locally distinct cultures were shaped by various factors, including geography and climate, relationship to the routes of distribution of goods, and history. For example, extending as Japan does north to south in a long and narrow archipelago, its climate and terrain vary greatly from one part of the country to another. About 70 percent of the country is occupied by mountains and forests, and the land is laced with many rivers and streams. In

The term *go-tochi* ご当地—“this place” with the honorific prefix *go*—seems to be everywhere lately. The mark of local identity, it crowns the names of dishes like ramen or curry that have a distinctive local taste, Kewpie dolls or Hello Kitty goods sporting some regional hallmark, and the titles of special exams on information and lore aimed at promoting particular towns or regions. Why such a boom? What sorts of things are the most popular? In this issue we’ll look at the *go-tochi* boom and the backdrop that has shaped it.

the era before the development of public transportation, whether a region was near the ocean, accessed by a broad river, or surrounded by mountains had an important impact on culture and fostered all sorts of differences.

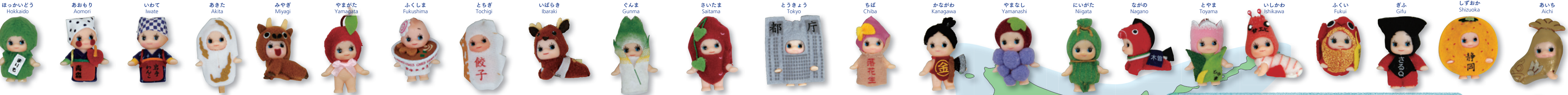
Television broadcasters, along with other media, have taken note of local diversity and have recently begun to introduce local specialties—things with the *go-tochi* stamp—in their programming. One television program has gained great popularity by featuring *go-tochi* foods, local customs, and other distinctive features of different locales around the country. The program’s viewers greatly enjoy the discovery of myriad differences, such as that foods or customs they have taken for granted are specific to a particular area or that the ingredients or ways of eating certain dishes can differ from one part of the country to another.

and businesses are another “promote-local” gimmick. In Hokkaido, for example, students at Rumoi Senbo High School, working in collaboration with a local noodle-making company, devised a specialty pasta called “Motchiri Kome-pasta” (a pasta made with rice flour).

Yuru-kyara ゆるキャラ

Some local governments have original mascot characters designed to help boost the appeal of their locale. These mascots, called *yuru-kyara* (loosely designed characters),* are widely liked. “Hikonyan ひこにゃん,” for example, is the very popular character created in 2006 by the city of Hikone, Shiga prefecture as part of celebrations of the 400th year since Hikone Castle, the city’s main tourist attraction, was built. Many tourists visit Hikone to get a glimpse of its whimsical mascot, whose success in enlivening local tourism has drawn considerable attention. A major festival was organized in October 2009 in Hikone that drew 109 such mascots from all over Japan. Some 72,000 people flocked to Hikone for a three-day convention of these endearing characters (<http://kigurumi.shiga-saku.net/>).

* Many *yuru-kyara* are often the work of amateurs that have a kind of uncomplicated, soothing charm. The term was coined by professional illustrator Miura Jun.



Celebrating Differences

Food たべもの

Japan’s food culture varies from one part of the country to another and there are some major regional differences. Although where the line falls is not completely clear, there does seem to be a difference in tastes between eastern and western Japan. For example, more pork is eaten in eastern Japan and more beef in western Japan. Preferred types of soup stock and soy sauce are different between these areas.

Some food product manufacturers have developed product lines that specifically take into account such regional tastes. For example, the *Donbei* brand of Nissin Food Products’ cup noodles has a basic soup stock made mainly with bonito, kelp, and soy sauce, but whereas for the eastern-Japan market the proportion of bonito flavoring is larger and dark soy sauce is used, for the western-Japan market the proportion of kelp is larger and light soy sauce is used.

Zoni: One dish in many guises

Zoni ぞうに, the special soup served in almost all parts of the country

at New Year’s, is often mentioned as reflecting differences in food tastes. This soup features various kinds of vegetables, fish, or meat. Pieces of *mochi*, glutinous rice-cakes, softened by either toasting or boiling, are also added. The custom in most of eastern Japan is to use square pieces of *mochi*, while that in western Japan is to use round pieces. In the Tohoku (東北 northeastern Honshu island), Kanto (関東 central Honshu), and Kyushu 九州 island regions, a clear soup is preferred; in the Kansai 関西 region centering on the Kyoto, Osaka, Kobe area, the soup is flavored with miso. The ingredients used differ from one area to another, often including products that are specialties of the local area. A typical *zoni* of Akita, for example, includes “sansai” (“mountain vegetables” such as mushrooms and fern frond), that of Miyagi prefecture includes seafood, and that of Hiroshima shellfish.

Go-tochi Guzzu ご当地グズ

Railway stations and expressway service areas sell many kinds of local specialty goods and souvenirs. Recently popular especially among young people are local goods (*go-tochi guzzu*) and local specialty snacks (ご当地スナック *go-tochi sunakku*) sold only in the area.

Among the most popular *go-tochi* goods are variously dressed Kewpie dolls and diverse *go-tochi* Hello Kitty goods such as those in costumes evoking a local product, tourist site, or famous person. Starting with the sales of “Lavender Hello Kitty” for Hokkaido in 1998, more than 1,000 *go-tochi* Hello Kitty characters are currently on sale. There are also *go-tochi* goods featuring Disney characters, including Minnie Mouse and Stitch. Not only goods featuring nationally famous characters but also products designed with local motifs and available only in the area are often very popular.

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