



Deep Dive: Tanabata (Star Festival)

What is the Star Festival?

The Star Festival (**Tanabata**, sometimes called *Shichiseki* or *Hoshimatsuri*) is a Japanese celebration that takes place annually on the **7th day of the 7th month** of the lunar calendar. It marks the only day of the year when two stars in the galaxy which are usually separated by the Milky Way, **Altair and Vega**, can meet, and has been celebrated in Japan since the 700s. Colourful festivals are held across Japan to celebrate in July and August.



Origin Myths

The origins of Tanabata arise from a Chinese legend in which a celestial weaver princess, Orihime (the Vega star), fell deeply in love with the herdsman Hikoboshi (the Altair star). However, their love was so great that they both ignored their duties; while Orihime neglected her weaving, Hikoboshi's cows wandered around the Milky Way. This carelessness angered Orihime's father, the God of the Heavens, who forbade them from seeing each other and thus separated them across the Milky Way. Eventually, Orihime's sadness moved her father, and he allowed them to meet once a year on the 7th day of the 7th month.

Celebrations in Japan

In Japan, people celebrate *Tanabata* by writing wishes on **tanzaku** (long, colorful slips of paper) and hanging them on a **bamboo wish tree**. The bamboo symbolizes strength and flexibility. Festivals happen in cities all around the country, featuring sparkling fireworks, delicious food stalls, vibrant craft markets and lively games.



The city of **Sendai** is particularly famous for its grand *Tanabata* celebrations, fireworks and light display representing the Milky Way. Other decorations besides **tanzaku** include **kinchaku** bags for prosperity, **orizuri** folded paper cranes that represent longevity, and **toami** nets that symbolize good fishing and good luck in business.



Tanabata - The Star Festival

Celebrations in Japan - Festival food



At this time, people typically enjoy eating a refreshing, chilled noodle dish called **somen**. The long, thin noodles are said to represent the strands of Orihime's **weaving threads** or the **Milky Way**. Other popular foods include **takoyaki** (octopus balls), **yakisoba** (stir-fried noodles), **yakitori** (grilled skewers), **okonomiyaki** (savory pancakes), and **kakigori** (shaved ice).



Celebrations in China

China also celebrates the Star Festival (*Qīxījié*) on the 7th day of the 7th month. Compared to Japan, there is more of an emphasis on **enduring romantic love**, which means the festival is sometimes also referred to as Chinese Valentine's Day.

Traditions such as incense burning, needlework competitions and preparing offerings to the two lovers are observed in various parts of China. Though the festival has been celebrated since the Han Dynasty, many of these customs are disappearing, and are more likely to be practiced in rural areas. Instead, **young couples** often exchange gifts and enjoy romantic dates to celebrate the special occasion.



Celebrations in Korea

Korea's Star Festival, **Chilseok**, shares many similarities with both the Japanese and Chinese festivities. It also originates from a tale about two star-crossed lovers who can only meet once a year. Traditionally, Koreans bathe for good luck, eat wheat-based foods, and offer fried pumpkins to the Big Dipper. Since *Chilseok* marks the beginning of the monsoon season, the rain during this time can be called *Chilseok* water.

