

Obon and the Funekko Nagashi Festival

2018/08/29

Togtokhtur Batbold (Mongolia)

Every year on the banks of the Kitakami River a festival takes place, where various shaped and coloured boats are set aflame and sent down the current. This festival, known as Funekko Nagashi (舟っこ流し), literally meaning 'setting boats adrift', is held every August during the annual three-day holiday known as Obon. I was lucky enough to be able to witness and experience the festival this year.



<Funekko Nagashi Festival>

The month of August in Morioka is generally a festive one, as a number of events take place, starting with Sansa Odori and continuing on with the Hanabi Festival. Obon however, seems to offer a different atmosphere. It is a Buddhist custom wherein people honor the departed spirits of their ancestors. Unlike the other festivals with big, extravagant displays, Obon in Morioka, for the first two days, seem to be more personal and sacred. I first noticed this while walking down the evening streets and saw candles and lanterns being lit by people, families and children quietly outside their homes.

The festival however, does end with a bang. On the very last day of the festival, The Funekko Nagashi involves not only smoldering torched boats or glowing lanterns on the river at night, but also fireworks to mark the end of the custom.



<Kitakami Riverbank>

Around 15 boats, pain-stakingly and elaborately decorated with dragon heads, are set afire and sent down the river, accompanied by a dozen or so men wearing fundoshi, who lead and pull the boats. It becomes even more impressive as rockets and small fireworks placed on the boats are set off by the flames, sending a plethora of sparks into the sky, and out of the mouths and eyes of the dragons' heads. Ash slowly descends on the onlookers and patrons busy watching and feasting on the local dishes. The boats are then followed by lanterns sent adrift on the river. The festival finally comes to a conclusion with fireworks sent up.



<Closing fireworks>

While the fireworks as compared to the previous Hanabi Festival were much smaller, and not as elaborately choreographed and accompanied by music, it was overall an enjoyable and fascinating experience. I would recommend anyone in Morioka interested in Japanese culture to experience it regardless of religion. Enhanced by the fact that I was accompanied by international students soon to be bound for home, I imagine it was a fitting and pleasant ending for their experiences here in Morioka.