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The Carp Banner (Koi Nobori) and Boys Day
(Staff Report)

In "NOTES ON JAPANESE HOLIDAYS", Community Analysis Report No. 4, dated April 2, 1943, the 5th of May is listed as "Boy Day (Tango No Sekku or Koi Nobori)". In the parenthesis "Koi Nobori" appears to be an equivalent of "Tango No Sekku". As a matter of fact, the two sets of words do not mean the same thing. "Tango No Sekku" is the name of the festival observed on the 5th of May, while "Koi Nobori" means the "Carp Banner" which is hoisted above the roof for the festival by the family who want to celebrate their having a boy or boys under 16 years in age.

Originally May 5 had no connection with the festival for boys. It was called "Tango" which means "The First Day of The Horse" in spring. In old Japan the people had a time-honored custom of designating twelve days by twelve animals just as each one of the seven days of a week has a name under the Gregorian calendar. The following is the list of the twelve animals chosen for this purpose. The names are listed in order just as Monday should come after Sunday.

1st., The Rat; 2nd., The Ox; 3rd., The Tiger; 4th., The Rabbit; 5th., The Dragon; 6th., The Snake; 7th., The Horse; 8th., The Sheep; 9th., The Monkey; 10th., The Cock; 11th., The Dog; 12th., The Wild Hog.

Why the first day of "The Horse" in spring was particularly chosen for the festival is not known. Perhaps in order to avoid consulting the calendar every year for the first day of "The Horse" it was

fixed once for all on the 5th of May, which was, of course, according to the prevailing lunar calendar. When Japan adopted the Gregorian calendar, it was shifted to May 5 in the new system. It is also unknown when and why this day was designated as the boys' festival day.

In the families who can afford to celebrate the 5th of May in a traditional manner, ^a set of "Kabuto" (Helmet) and "Yoroi" (Mail) is placed in the tokonoma, the most honored alcove in a guest-room. Often a doll clad in the full regalia of an old Japanese warrior is also set beside the helmet and mail. The "Kakemono" (Hanging picture in the alcove) is also changed to that of a figure of an ancient warrior. A special rice cake called "Chimaki" is partaken by the family members. But the most conspicuous sign of the festival is the "Koi Nobori", or Carp Banner. The banner is a figure of a carp made of paper, hollow inside with openings at the mouth and tail. It is usually fastened at the mouth-end to the top of a long bamboo pole, which is higher than the roof of the house. When a long stick is not available, it is fastened to a short one and erected on the top of the roof. The length of the banner is roughly from three to ten feet. It makes an appearance of a real fish when it floats in the breeze, the air going into the mouth and out through the tail opening. It is customary to float as many carps as the number of boys under 16 years of age in a family.

When this custom of hoisting the "Koi Nobori" came in practice is not known today. It can be safely assumed that the custom is more than two hundred years old. Probably early in the Tokugawa era an enterprising merchant hit upon an idea for creating a new demand,

connecting the carp's habit of swimming up-stream, its tenacity of life and its longevity, with desirable attributes for a boy. It is interesting to note that the zoologists today inform us of the carp's tenacity of life, its longevity and fecundity. They tell us that the carp was indigenous in India and China. It moved with civilization all over the world. Its entry to the continental United States is recorded as 1877. Since that time, it propagated and spread all over the American continents. Under artificial conditions it is reported to have lived as long as 150 years, but in the natural habitat it is believed to live only as long as 15 years. In America it grows to about ten feet.

The following account has been added here as it shows an aspect of the carp's quality. It was told to me by one of my uncles, who was an expert in culinary art and owned an old established restaurant for exclusive people in Osaka.

"Koi No Ikezukuri" (Making live sashimi of a carp) was considered in old Japan as one of the most delicate accomplishments of culinary art. It was served only to exclusive guests, when they held a special feast. To prepare the dish a fresh live carp of twenty inches or larger is chosen. Its gills and belly are drawn and cleaned, and its scales scraped off. The head is not severed. It is carefully washed in cold fresh water, while still alive. Then the skin is separated from the meat, cutting it along the "abdominal side" but left uncut along the back. With its head unsevered and its skin attached on the back, the meat on both sides is carefully sepa-

rated from the bones and is cut crosswise in thin pieces as it done in making sashimi, but all this is done in such way that the central part of the meat is left uncut, so that the nervous connection with the spinal code is not severed. The above operation must be done very quickly with a thin but sharp knife having a blade half an inch wide and six or seven inches long. It requires dexterity and experience in handling the knife, as the fish must be served to the guests before it is actually dead.

When the fish with its head unsevered and its skin intact is placed in a service plate and garnished with greens, it is set before the hostess or the head waitress and appears as if it were still alive. With a pair of chopsticks, she carefully raises the skin and begins to dish out the sliced meat. When she picks a few slices for the first dish, the fish trembles - probably by "reflex" - and then the entire meat crumbles in pieces as it was sliced before. This culinary art, however, like some other refinements and food habits of old Japan, belongs now to "ancient history".

Incidentally, whenever a whole fish is cooked and served, it is customary in Japan not to sever the head. The inference is that "being beheaded" is the greatest disgrace to a samurai on a battlefield or to people of other classes and the fish, in a sense, is not to be tampered with.

At Tule Lake, on May 5th, Boys' Day was observed. Carp flew from house-poles in all blocks and many families, with male children

displayed a number of these decorations. In many families, where a boy had been born during the year, elaborate banquets were held in the home and visitors invited (usually relatives).

This holiday followed Tencho Setsu (the Emperor's Birthday) in which, on the 29th of April, flags were displayed only in private homes and some mess-halls had bowing ceremonies and evening entertainment. Generally, Tencho Setsu was a quiet holiday, while Boys' Day was gay and ostentatious.