

Go-Tochi Boom: We Love Local

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.



This mark indicates that more related information is included on the “Click Japan” website. <http://www.tjf.or.jp/clicknippon/>

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 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.

Local PR



In the course of Japan's rapid economic growth beginning in the mid 1950s and continuing through the early 1970s, which resulted in the industrialization and urbanization of the country, many people left the countryside and moved to the cities. The population of rural areas aged, leaving many villages practically empty. Local governments and business organizations have devised various schemes to stem depopulation and reinvigorate communities.

Go-tochi kentei ご当地検定

A more recent vehicle for promoting things local are the *go-tochi kentei*, or “know-this-place” exams that challenge people to learn about the history, culture, industry and other lore of a particular area and test their mastery. In 2004, nearly 10,000 people took the Kyoto Kentei, held by the Kyoto Chamber of Commerce and Industry for the first time, setting off a boom in similar tests elsewhere. The Nintendo DS game software *Go-Tochi Kentei* was put on sale in 2006. You can try various exams included in this software (<http://www.spike.co.jp/gotouchi/main.html>).

Go-tochi exams inspire many natives of the area in question to learn about or rediscover their own local culture. (See “Meeting People.”)

“Promote-local” gimmicks produced by high school students

Specialty products, made with locally produced goods, that are developed and marketed as cooperative projects by local high schools

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 pre-

fecture 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.



Hikonyan

© Hikone City

ほっかいどう
Hokkaido



あomor
Aomori



いわて
Iwate



あきた
Akita



みやぎ
Miyagi



やまがた
Yamagata



ふくしま
Fukushima



とちぎ
Tochigi



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.



⑨ Hiroshima

Go-tochi Guzzu ご当地グッズ

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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⑩ Nagasaki



おきなわ
Okinawa



かごしま
Kagoshima



ながさき
Nagasaki

いばらき
Ibaraki



ぐんま
Gunma



さいたま
Saitama



とうきょう
Tokyo



ちば
Chiba



かながわ
Kanagawa



やまなし
Yamanashi



----- Border between the eastern and western markets for the Donbei brand of cup noodles

○ Dialect expressions for とても (very)

○ Dialect expressions for つかれた (I'm tired)

なまら

らずもね



① Akita

すんげえ



Donbei

えらかった……

⑥ Tottori

ぶち



ぼっけー

えらい……

めっちゃ

ごっつー

しんけん

しょう

ものすご

ことうたちや……

よだき……

ごっつい

しんだい……

でら

すっげー

むっちゃ

がんこ



④ Tokyo

⑤ Mie



角餅 kakumochi (square pieces of mochi) area
丸餅 marumochi (round pieces of mochi) area

① © Ryusendou Kankoukaikan
② © Miyagi Prefecture
③④⑤⑥⑦⑧⑨⑩ © Zenkoku Mochi Kogyo Kyodo Kumiai

⑧ Kagoshima



みやざき
Miyazaki



くまもと
Kumamoto



おおいた
Oita



さが
Saga



ふくおか
Fukuoka



こうち
Kochi



えひめ
Ehime

にいがた
Niigata

ながの
Nagano

とやま
Toyama

いしかわ
Ishikawa

ふくい
Fukui

ぎふ
Gifu

しずおか
Shizuoka

あいち
Aichi

ことば Language

Besides the standard vernacular (きょうつうご *kyotsugo*), Japanese is spoken in many dialects (ほうげん *hogen*). The dialect categories are variously identified by region, prefecture, or subregion; for example, the Kansai dialect (かんさいべん *kansai-ben*) is regional, the Kagoshima (かごしまべん *kagoshima-ben*) and Tochigi (とちぎべん *tochigi-ben*) dialects are prefecture-wide, and the Tsugaru dialect (つがるべん *tsugaru-ben*) is subregional. Some of the differences stem from intonation or accent and words or inflections are sometimes completely different from standard Japanese. Some words carry nuances that are specific to that dialect alone.

Until quite recently, most people from outlying prefectures thought it embarrassing and unsophisticated to speak their home dialect in public. For a while after the end of World War II (1939-1945), education officials advised schools to discourage use of dialects and train students to master standard Japanese. With the dissemination of television, use of the standard language became widespread and many of the traditional dialects went into decline.

Dialects enriching expression

Recently, however, dialects are back. A movement to preserve and value them has gained momentum, and it is now general practice to use standard speech or dialect as suited to the situation. Using dialect in private communication, such as when speaking to close friends, is now viewed positively, in the recognition that it enhances the sense of solidarity among members of groups, allows them to express their identity, and enriches the overall quality of the language in general.

Encouraging the diversity of language

Active efforts to bring dialect into the limelight have also emerged. Some theater performances are given in dialect and quite a few comedians and other entertainers are known for their use of dialect. An increasing number of television programs take up the subject of appreciating dialect. Only a few years ago dialect speech enjoyed something of a boom among high school girls, who experimented with various dialect expressions in their daily conversation and email exchanges. Some people have criticized such use of dialects as an exclusivist code used among group insiders, but others see it as a valuable way to develop awareness of the diversity of language.

Let's Try!

Pick three of your favorite Kewpie dolls among the 47 examples shown here and then try to find the prefectures on the map. What is the theme of your favorite Kewpies costumes? Can you find out what it is in Japanese?

What clothes Kewpie dolls wear can be found at
<http://www.tjf.or.jp/takarabako/>

かがわ
Kagawa

とくしま
Tokushima

やまぐち
Yamaguchi

しまね
Shimane

とっとり
Tottori

おかやま
Okayama

ひろしま
Hiroshima

コスチュームキューピー® © ONLY-ONE

みえ
Mie

なら
Nara

わかやま
Wakayama

おおさか
Osaka

きょうと
Kyoto

しが
Shiga

ひょうご
Hyogo