

Tanabata in Noshiro

Tanabata is a festival of Chinese origin that was first celebrated in Japan at the imperial court in the middle of the eighth century. It became widely celebrated in the early Edo period (1603–1867).

Tanabata, literally “seventh evening,” is also known as the Star Festival (*Hoshi Matsuri*). It is based on the tale of two deities—the weaver maiden Orihime and the cowherd Hikiboshi—who represent the stars Vega and Altair, respectively. The two were married, but in their joy at being together, they ceased to perform their daily tasks. In consequence, they were banished to opposite ends of the Milky Way and allowed to meet only once a year, on the seventh day of the seventh month. Vega and Altair appear together in the heavens around the seventh day of the seventh month in the traditional lunar calendar, which falls in early August. Today, Tanabata is widely observed on July 7, but some regions continue to hold it in August.

Tanabata is usually celebrated by hanging colored strips of paper called *tanzaku* on decorated branches of bamboo. People write their wishes on the *tanzaku*, hoping they will be fulfilled.

The city of Noshiro also marks the holiday with a series of festivities. The highlights are two parades: Tenkū no Fuyajō (“Lantern Castles in the Sky”) on August 3 and 4, and Noshiro Nebunagashi, or “washing away fatigue and misfortune,” on August 6 and 7. Sometimes called Yaku-Tanabata, the Noshiro Nebunagashi celebration expresses residents’ prayers for an end to the sleep-preventing heat of summer. It also conveys their hope for protection from diseases and for a bountiful autumn harvest.

Both events feature huge, illuminated lantern floats in the shape of castles. Atop the castles are *shachi*—mythical animals with the body of a carp and the head of a tiger. The castle floats are paraded through the streets and accompanied by musicians and singers. Two existing floats are used in Tenkū no Fuyajō: the 17.6-meter *Karoku*, and the 24.1-meter *Chikasue*, known as the tallest lantern castle in Japan. During Yaku-Tanabata, on the other hand, Noshiro neighborhoods create their own elaborate float designs. The festival’s grand finale on August 7 sees the *shachi* from these floats launched on the Yoneshiro River and set ablaze.