

## *Kitamaebune and Hinagashi*

In the middle of the Edo period (1603–1867), *kitamaebune* trading ships began sailing from Osaka to Hokkaido via the Kanmon Straits (which separate Honshu and Kyushu) and along the Sea of Japan coast. In the Meiji era (1868–1912), their number rapidly increased. These ships carried goods on their outbound and return journeys, unlike the vessels that transported daily necessities from the Kansai region to Edo (modern-day Tokyo) via the Pacific coast. The holds of the Edo-bound ships were empty on their return, limiting profits.

The trade route of the *kitamaebune* featured multiple calls along the Sea of Japan coast, including ports in Toyama, Niigata, and Yamagata Prefectures and these stops allowed merchants to maximize the income from the journey. The merchant sailors acted as *kaizumisen* (merchant carriers), selling anything from their hold that could turn a profit and buying anything considered a bargain, which they could then sell at the next stop.

This practice of buying and selling resulted in the development of connections between ports along the *kitamaebune* route. In addition to goods, merchants traded aspects of their culture, which members of the boats' crews picked up and shared with people they met in other regions on their voyages. The Aomori Prefecture folk song *Tsugaru-aiya-bushi*, for example, is understood to be derived from the Niigata Prefecture song *Sado Okesa*, which was based on a tune from Kyushu called *Haiya-bushi*.

Another instance is the introduction of *konbu* (dried kelp) from Hokkaido to western Japan by *kitamaebune*. This basic component of *dashi* (basic stock) fish broth transformed cooking during the Edo period, becoming a fundamental ingredient in traditional Japanese cuisine.

The northern-bound ships also brought the custom of making sweets for *hinamatsuri* (Dolls' Festival to pray for the success and health of girls) to Tsuruoka. Wood block molds to form the sweets were brought from Kyoto via the merchant sailors.

*Hinagashi* (sweets to offer at the Dolls' Festival) are typically made to reflect the specialties of the region. They include ingredients thought to promote good health, represent success, and appeal to children. Depending on the shops, the shapes of sweets will vary, featuring ingredients such as bamboo shoots, peaches, persimmon, or sea bream. Tsuruoka's *hinagashi* has been influenced by Kyoto's elegant and refined culture and use of "*shinko zaiku*" (figurines made of sugar and rice-flour dough) which was common during the Edo period in Edo. Tsuruoka's unique style of *hinagashi* displays gratitude for good fortune and wishing for the growth and happiness of girls. It has become an indispensable part of the *hinamatsuri* of Tsuruoka. Tsuruoka's *hinamatsuri* incorporates the culture of Kyoto and Edo, and Tsuruoka's confectionery craftsmen have worked hard to develop their own *hinagashi*, passing down their practices. Today, *hinagashi* is an indispensable part of Tsuruoka's *hinamatsuri*.

The busiest time for producing *hinagashi* is from mid-February until early-April. In Tsuruoka city and its surrounding region, *hinamatsuri* is celebrated on March 3 or April 3, depending on each family's wishes.

*Hinagashi* are displayed alongside *hina* dolls, which also arrived in Tsuruoka via the *kitamaebune*, in local homes during the *hinamatsuri* season. *Hina* dolls are also exhibited at multiple sites in Tsuruoka, for events such as the Shonai Hina Kaido and Tsuruoka Hina Monogatari.