

The History of Hot-Spring Therapy (*Toji*)

Pilgrims of health

Records show that the practice of visiting hot springs for therapeutic reasons dates back to the Nara period (710–784). Originally, however, only aristocrats had the time and money to travel to hot springs. The practice became more widespread in the early seventeenth century, after Japan was unified under the Tokugawa shogunate.

Ironically, when travel finally became safe in the Edo period (1603–1867), most forms of travel were prohibited. Among the few exceptions were religious pilgrimages and trips for hot-spring cures. People traveling for health reasons had to get a special permit to show at the checkpoints along their route. While the wealthy would be transported in palanquins, ordinary citizens walked – carrying their futons, a supply of rice, and possibly even an infirm elderly relative on their back. During the Edo period, guidebooks were published to educate the public about the different health benefits of the country’s many hot springs.

Over time, the focus of hot-spring visits began to switch from therapy to pleasure, and by the eighteenth century, Japanese spa towns, like their counterparts in Europe, became more sociable places. Because visitors generally stayed for several weeks, they would get to know other guests and strike up friendships.

Japanese society underwent radical changes during the Meiji era (1868–1912). In addition to an improved standard of medical care that accompanied the introduction of scientific health-care practices, changes in lifestyle meant that long-stay hot-spring therapy, or *toji*, fell out of favor. Naturally, this only served to accelerate the hot springs’ shift away from serving as health destinations toward being tourist spots.

As the twentieth century advanced, people – particularly “salarymen” – started going to hot springs in large groups. Hulking reinforced-concrete buildings replaced modest and elegant wooden structures, and the old traditions of hot-spring therapy and its culture withered away even further.

Yet there was one part of Japan where the old culture survived: the remoter parts of Tohoku in the northeast of Honshu. Tohoku is a major farming region, and local farmers used to come to hot springs for long stays with their families in the off-season to recuperate from the physical labor of the previous year and prepare for the next.

Because the same farming families would visit the same hot spring at the same time every year, the atmosphere was relaxed and convivial. People would swap food (mountain vegetables they had picked locally or specialties from their own villages they had brought with them), gather to sing folk songs, and hold sentimental farewell parties when a group headed home. Nowadays, other than dairy farmers, there are few full-time farmers left in Japan. Even in Tohoku, customers opting for the traditional long-stay, self-catering options rather than full-board accommodations are decreasing and now account for under 10 percent of visitors.