

# Why does Japan love Halloween so much, and is it celebrating the holiday the right way?

As we've seen, Japan is really psyched about Halloween. The holiday has been steadily growing in popularity for the last decade, and with October 31 falling on a Saturday in 2015, this year's celebration is likely to be Japan's liveliest Halloween ever.

But how did Halloween become Japan's second favorite foreign holiday, right after Christmas? And also, is Japan staying true to the spirit of the holiday, or is it forcefully pressing it into its own domestic mold, as the country wants to do with cultural imports?

Mainstream Japan was almost entirely uninterested in Halloween until the start of the 21st century. But the holiday's roots go back much farther than that, so why the delay in its coming to Japan?

According to Eri Sekiguchi, a professor of linguistic culture at Doshisha Women's College of Liberal Arts in Kyoto, Japanese businesses did try to popularize Halloween in the 1980s. This coincides with the golden age of Japan's bubble economy, an unprecedented period of affluence and internationalism in which Christmas and Valentine's Day became annual events that many people looked forward to.

Halloween, though, was hampered by its dark atmosphere, which was the polar opposite of the serene, romantic feelings of Christmas and Valentine's Day. Then came the incident in 1992 in which Yoshihiro Hattori, a teen exchange student in the U.S., was killed while on his way to a Halloween party. Throughout the 1990s and into the early 2000s, Hattori's death was the first thing that came to mind for many Japanese when they thought of Halloween.

As time passed, though, it became apparent that Hattori's death was not indicative of a regular wave of Halloween violence. In 1999, Tokyo Disneyland tested the waters with a one-day Halloween event, which proved to be so popular that it's now grown into a two-month series of parades and shows held throughout September and October at the theme park. At roughly the same time that Tokyo Disneyland started its Halloween events, the city of Kawasaki held its first Halloween costume parade, which has now become a major draw for costuming fans in the Tokyo area.

But as influential as Disney may be in Japan, there's more to the boom than the enthusiastic promotions of Mickey and the citizens of Kawasaki. There's actually a perfect storm of three reasons Japan can't seem to get enough of Halloween.

### 1. Sweets

You may have read in some sociocultural anthropology textbook that Japanese people don't like sweets. That's not true. Not at all.

Japan may not like its pastries and candies to be as sweet as their western counterparts, but the country does love desserts. And as Japan's palate becomes increasingly broad, the appeal of a holiday with "eating all sorts of sweets" as one of the primary pillars of its foundation only becomes stronger.

### 2. Seasonal

It's not uncommon to hear Japanese people say that one of the great things about Japan is that it has four seasons, as though everywhere else on the planet is locked into just one weather pattern all year long. Shortsighted as the remark may be, it illustrates just how much Japan loves to experience the changing of the seasons. Halloween falls at a nice spot in the calendar, in that it comes after the last warmth of summer but before most of the leaves start changing colors, giving people in Japan one more milestone to celebrate while progressing further into autumn.

Oh, and as a bit of synergy with point number 1, Halloween is also a great excuse to make, buy, and eat all sorts of pumpkin and purple yam-flavored sweets (purple having been co-opted by Japan into serving as one of Halloween's primary colors, along with orange and black).

### 3. Cosplay

Halloween's popularity has advanced almost perfectly in lockstep with the rise of cosplay in Japan. Go back to about 15 years ago, and cosplayers had only a handful of occasions each year to dress up for. Now you can find some sort of anime or video game event going on almost every week, to say nothing of the scenic spots of Tokyo where groups of cosplayers informally gather every weekend to snap photos and trade advice.

The explosion of otaku culture over the past decade has created a new crop of cosplayers itching to show off their creations, and also made the idea of dressing up just for fun a lot less intimidating to those who aren't necessarily dedicated costuming enthusiasts. Between the hundreds of anime, video games, and Hollywood fantasy and science fiction movies that are released each year, just about anyone with an interest in pop culture can find one character they'd like to step into the shoes of

for a moment, and Japan's growing number of Halloween parties and parades give people a venue at which to do just that.

But staunch traditionalists may take issue with how Japan celebrates Halloween. At any gathering, "cool" or "sexy" costumes outnumber "scary" ones by a wide margin, and the overlap with anime cosplay means you're at least as likely to bump into Sailor Moon or Attack on Titan's Titans as Dracula or the Ghost Busters in Tokyo on October 31. Private homes don't hand out candy to trick-or-treaters, either, so there isn't the same feeling of community you might get in America, where costumed kids are making the rounds and exchanging greetings of "Happy Halloween" with their neighbors.

Still, like all aspects of culture, holidays evolve (which is why we don't make Jack-o-lanterns out of turnips anymore), and there's no law requiring people to dress up as the classic Universal Studios monsters. Trick-or-treating is gaining traction with local businesses, too, and right now the shopping arcade in my part of Yokohama is putting up signs marking which merchants are going to be giving out candy on Saturday. So while people in Japan might not have completely bought into the horror aspect of Halloween, they're doing just fine with the having fun and eating candy parts, which only the grumpiest of trolls would begrudge them.