

Celebrating Saijo

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This fall I attended Saijo Matsuri. For a whole year I had been hearing about how great Saijo Matsuri was, and I wanted to go. Unfortunately, Saijo Matsuri would often happen during the week, which meant that I would be working. However, this year it seems I was meant to attend because the festival was on the weekend. Even more convincing was my friend in Saijo who invited me to come celebrate with her.

I arrived at my friend Fujioka-san's house on Saturday afternoon. She handed me a traditional looking Japanese outfit to wear, and then we rushed out the door. On our way to the shrine, we picked up Fujioka-san's friend. Once at the shrine, I watched in amazement as the two women prayed and gave money at every single little shrine around the big shrine. There must have been at least 20 or 30 of them. I had never seen anyone pray at the big shrine and the little ones, especially not all of them, before.

Just as the two women finished their prayers, the first Danjiri started to arrive. The Danjiri are giant celebratory floats. They are very tall and heavy, covered in intricate carvings, and carried by teams of intoxicated men*. Each Danjiri comes from a different neighborhood in Saijo, and has its own unique patterns and colors. Some were just carved wood with a colorful banner on the top tier, while others were more flashy, painted in a swirl of bright colors. Most, if not all, had a taiko inside which proclaimed their arrival.

The two women and I sat down on the stairs outside of the shrine to watch as ten, then twenty, and even more Danjiri lined up in front to visit the shrine deities. Then, one by one, the men carried the Danjiri with great cheers, chanting, and shrill whistles up the stairs to the torii gate.

After watching the procession to the shrine, we moved down toward an open yard. Here, the Danjiri were paraded around in the middle with the Mikoshi. These were not just any Mikoshi though. They were by far the biggest Mikoshi I had ever seen, at least seven meters tall. These Mikoshi looked like great golden chariots, racing around on two giant wooden wheels with several men standing on top. The racing Mikoshi, the towering tipping Danjiri, and the hundreds of milling spectators mixed with the cacophony of taiko, whistles, and chants created a truly thrilling environment.

However, as I learned the next day watching approximately 88 Danjiri and two Mikoshi parade up to an ancient lord's residence, the thrill comes at a dangerous price. As it turned out, three people had been injured during the weekend's festivities by the Mikoshi. To any spectator, this would not come as much of a surprise after watching the massive wooden chariot race around crowded areas. In fact, there have been incidents in the past where people have actually been killed by the giant structures.

Yet, despite the element of danger (or perhaps even partially because of it), Saijo Matsuri is something that I highly

recommend everyone attend at least once. The air buzzes with excitement and the people of Saijo carry the Danjiri with pride. You see, these Danjiri are built and maintained through the donations of the people from each float's own neighborhood. They can cost hundreds of thousands of dollars and the people still find them to be a worthwhile investment. They not only represent the pride of a neighborhood, but together they are the pride of Saijo.

*The longer I live in Japan, the more I recognize the role of intoxicated men carrying things as a central feature of local Japanese festivals. Somehow, they always manage to get to wherever they are going.

