



Flying Carp

In days gone by, when a little child was born in Japan, the most important task of the parents was to invoke the gods and entrust the newborn baby to them. The gods were not always close by and did not always know about the birth of a little Japanese boy or girl. But many dangers lurked all around.

In those distant times, a girl was born in a little village, and was given the name *Haruko*, or Spring Child. She was lovely: she had alabaster skin, black hair, black eyes, tiny dimples and a slightly upturned little nose. The whole family and all the neighbors would come to admire the beautiful girl.

The parents prayed to the gods to care for their little girl. They tried to invoke them, clapping their hands three times, but the gods did not appear. They were playing somewhere far away and did not know that little *Haruko* had just been born.

How could they summon them? How could they convince at least one of them to look after the little child? Her parents discussed this for a night and a day, and then another day and night. Finally, *Haruko's* father, who was an incredibly brave and hardworking man, decided to help the gods to reach his daughter. He went to the forest in search of a very tall tree. When he found it, he cut it down and dragged it home. With the help of his neighbors, he put it up in front of his house. At the very top of the tree, he placed lots of colorful strings, hoping that gods traveling through these parts would take a liking to them, and would stop and see his beloved daughter and take care of her.

Not long afterwards, attracted by the colorful ribbons fluttering in the wind, *kami* appeared – they flew down from heaven and took care of little *Haruko*, who grew up to be a wonderful girl, and lived long and happily, having a good husband and a cluster of children. She lived to a ripe old age, enjoying the respect of family and neighbors.



For many years, she would tell tales of this exceptional care, her ingenious father and the favor of the gods. She also advised that parents, in taking care of their children, should summon the gods and put up high masts bearing colorful strings.

But that's not the end of the story.

Over time, more and more children were born in Japan and more and more parents set up high masts. However, in addition to colorful strings, colored carp were also suspended from them.

According to an old Japanese legend, after swimming along a difficult section of a rushing mountain river, carp become dragons – good animals endowed with great strength and courage. By hanging colorful carp from high masts, parents expressed good wishes for their children: they wanted them to be as bold and brave as carp, to be able to face adversity like them. At the very top, they placed the *fukinagashi* banner; next was the huge daddy carp – *magoi*, most frequently colored black; then the mummy carp – *higo*, which was pink or red; and lastly as many small multi-colored carp as there were children in the house. After many, many years, carp became the symbol of Japanese Children's Day – *Kodomo no hi*.

And how is it nowadays?

When a child is born in a Japanese family, the grandmother or a close family member takes the child to the local temple. Yes, yes – the gods now have a place of their own; they don't have to traverse the endless skies in search of shelter. In Japan, there are many beautiful temples, where – between the 30th and 100th day of their life – children are taken to be placed under the special protection of a specific *kami*, living in this temple.

And in the whole of Japan, *koinobori* carp banners flutter in the wind in the first days of May.