

FACE TO FACE

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Yamagata in Focus:

Safflower Dyeing at the Kahoku-cho Benibana Shiriyokan

Kyung Min Kim

Coordinator for International Relations at AIRY



Safflower, or *benibana*, is the prefectural flower of Yamagata, and well known to its people. Despite this, hands-on opportunities are surprisingly few, so this time, we're introducing a place where you can get up close and personal with safflowers.

To learn about and experience the safflower for ourselves, we paid visit to Benibana Shiriyokan, the "Safflower Museum," in Kahoku-cho. If you make a reservation a week in advance, you can try your hand at safflower dyeing at the "Scarlet Workshop" inside the museum.

When we arrived at the museum, Abe-san from the Safflower Guide Association came to meet us. Abe-san explained much about safflowers as he accompanied us around Benibana Shiriyokan.

In their heyday, the safflowers unique to the Murayama region, also known as "Mogami Safflowers," made up 50–60% of safflowers grown in Japan. Those safflowers were pressed into easy-to-carry *beni-mochi* pellets and loaded onto horses and boats, which carried them all the way to Kyoto.

Once in Kyoto, the safflowers were transformed by artisans into a crimson colorant, which was used by the ladies of Kyoto to color their lips, or in the dyeing of beautiful fabrics.

After learning all about safflowers, we headed over to the Scarlet Workshop for our safflower-dyeing experience. Our teachers were Miyako Endo-san, with 29-years of experience in safflower dyeing, and Kimiko Suzuki-san, with 23 years' experience.

First, in order to create a pattern on our silk handkerchiefs, we wrapped three parts of our (still white) handkerchiefs with rubber bands. Wrapping the rubber bands correctly was more difficult than anticipated, but with our teachers' encouragement we managed to create three-spot patterns.

Before we dyed our handkerchiefs, the teachers explained to us the fundamentals of turning safflowers into dye. To create the beautiful color distinctive to safflower requires an extraordinary amount of time and effort, which is why the color is considered so valuable.

After submersing the handkerchiefs in the dye, we swished them around in the liquid. Our hands also became quite red from being in the dye, but every time we muddled the handkerchiefs around they became more and more beautifully dyed, so we had fun swishing them back and forth by hand.

After 10 minutes of leaving the handkerchiefs in water to stop the dyeing process, we were able to hold our own personal safflower-dyed handkerchiefs, each-one-of-a-kind.

Throughout the day, I learned so much about the safflowers which I had previously only known as "Yamagata's flower," and got the chance to draw out the vibrant color of safflower with my own hands. I hope that you will also make the trip to Benibana Shiriyokan, to see sides of the safflower that are yet unknown to you, experience safflower dyeing for yourself, and really get to know the flower that is so symbolic of Yamagata.

International Insights:

Understanding Multicultural Diversity

Daniel Brooks

Coordinator for International Relations



Fundamentally, the job of a Coordinator for International Relations is to build bridges between Japan and foreign countries and

cultures. We get to know all sorts of Japanese people, from elementary-school students to retirees, and have many opportunities to introduce multiculturalism and to learn more about Japan. I am often asked, as a CIR, what impressions foreigners—*gaikokujin*—have of Japan; however, as the term “*gaikokujin*” encompasses countless different people, it’s quite a difficult question to answer.

Not only white foreign residents from English-speaking countries, but also people of color from English-speaking countries, or from East Asia, and even Japan’s *zainichi* Korean community: we are all considered *gaikokujin*. But despite our common foreignness, we each have our own ways of thinking, are living different lives in Japan, and are having different experiences. So, if you ask me, “what is Yamagata like, from a foreigner’s perspective?” I can only tell you what it looks like from the perspective of one individual white man, from one small region of one English-speaking country.

When we think about concepts like “culture” and “nationality,” it is important to recognize that both Japanese and *gaikokujin* alike belong to diverse groups. After all, the experiences, culture, and

modes of thought a Japanese person living in Tohoku are bound to be quite different from those of a Japanese person living in Tokyo. Japanese people with diverse racial heritages exist, as do Japanese people who trace their lineage back to indigenous peoples of these islands, like the Ainu.

All *gaikokujin* cannot be said to be the same. Nor can all Japanese people. That being the case, when thinking about groups of people—whether they be groups you belong to or not—it is imperative to conceive of them not in a single, simplistic, reductive image, but rather an inclusive and multifaceted one.

I would, for instance, ask you reconsider some of the beliefs about English-speaking countries and native English speakers that seem to be pervasive among Japanese people. The belief that all white people are native English speakers is rampant across Japan. Judging from the Japanese media and personal experience, there is a deep-rooted stereotype that “blue-eyed, white-skinned people are English-speaking people.” Many times, I’ve been spoken to in English or asked for English help by people I don’t know, before I have even said anything in English myself.

I think that those of us involved in English-language education and international exchange here in Yamagata prefecture have an obligation to challenge these stereotypes. I also believe that in today’s rapidly globalizing world, Yamagata will suffer economically and culturally if it does nothing to combat the prejudice relating to English, English-speaking countries, and *gaikokujin* in general. I hope you will join together to help bring a more complex vision of multiculturalism to light in the Yamagata community.

National Pension

Lump-sum Withdrawals

The Japanese National Pension and Welfare Annuity Insurance programs have a “lump-sum withdrawal” payment system. In the event that a person of non-Japanese nationality has paid into the pension and insurance program for at least 6th months while residing in Japan, they can receive a lump-sum payment through this system by following the proper claim procedures within 2 years of leaving Japan. Such persons who have filed a moving-out form with their municipal office and have departed Japan with re-entry permission can receive this payment. (Please note that those who have not submitted a moving-out form are generally unable to receive the payout.)

Required Form

“Application for Lump-sum Withdrawal Payments” (Can be downloaded in multiple languages at the following link): <http://www.nenkin.go.jp/service/jukyu/sonota-kyufu/dattai-ichiji/20150406.html>

Required Supporting Documents

- Passport photocopy (pages confirming your name, date of birth, nationality, signature, date of departure from Japan and residence status)
- Document(s) containing the bank name, branch name, branch address, and account number for the bank account the money is to be transferred to, as well as proof that you (the requester) are the rightful owner of the account (such as a document issued by your bank, or the bank's stamp in the appropriate field on the application form)
- Your blue pension handbook

Lump-sum welfare annuity withdrawals under these circumstances are subject to withholding tax at a rate of 20.42%; however, the taxed amount can be refunded via final income tax return. For this, you must designate a residence and consumption tax agent in advance with the tax office. Please consult the National Tax Agency's website (<http://www.nta.go.jp>) for details.

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