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# A fictitious festival as a traditional event: the Bonbori Festival at Yuwaku Onsen, Kanazawa city

Takayoshi Yamamura

**Abstract:** This article discusses the Bonbori Festival, which is a fictitious festival originally depicted in the anime *Hanasaku Iroha*, in Yuwaku Onsen, Kanazawa city, Japan. It describes how the local tourist association and the anime production committee cooperated with each other to create a new festival. It was found that both the region and production company clearly recognised what the event itself was, and constructed a cooperative relationship to enable it to be successfully held as a genuine festival.

**アブストラクト：**金沢市湯涌温泉では、アニメ作品『花咲くいろは』の劇中で描かれた架空の祭りを基に創られた「湯涌ぼんぼり祭り」が 2011 年から始まった。本稿では、この祭りが実現に至ったプロセスを整理することで、地元の観光協会とアニメ製作委員会がどのような協力関係を構築したのか考察する。そして、地域側も製作側も本業が何であることを認識し、協力関係を構築していた点が、祭りを実現・継続していくうえで、重要な要件であった点を示す。

**Keywords:** Bonbori Festival, Yuwaku Onsen, *Hanasaku Iroha*, anime, tie-ins.

**キーワード：**ぼんぼり祭り、湯涌温泉、花咲くいろは、アニメ、タイイン

## Introduction

Yuwaku Onsen (hot spring resort) is known as Kanazawa's 'guest room' (*okuzashiki*). It has a population of around 1,000 people but ten Japanese-style guesthouses with the capacity to accommodate a maximum of 500 overnight guests. In 2014 there were 51,196 overnight visitors (Table 1), making it a quiet *onsen* district nestled in the mountains.

In 2011, a new festival named the Bonbori (paper lantern) Festival was created for this *onsen* district. Following the lighting ceremony (when the local community first turns on the lights that year in the paper lanterns on both side of the approach to Yuwaku Inari Shrine) on 23 July, the main festival was held on 9 October (from July to October, the paper lanterns were lit up from 19:00 to 22:00 every night). According to the Yuwaku Onsen Tourist Association, approximately 500 visitors attended the lighting ceremony and 5,000 attended the main festival. During these events, the town bustled with visitors from across the country.

In reality, the Bonbori Festival is a fictitious festival originally depicted in the anime *Hanasaku Iroha*. The anime production committee cooperated with the local tourist association to establish an executive committee to hold the event as an actual regional festival. Furthermore, the executive committee intended it not merely to be a one-off event. They wanted it to continue into the future as a permanent event for the *onsen* district. The Bonbori Festival (both the lighting ceremony and main the festival) was held for a second time in 2012, a third time in 2013 and a fourth time in 2014 (Table 2).



Figure 1: Poster for the second Yuwaku Bonbori Festival 2012

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Table 1: The number of people staying in Yuwaku Onsen each year.

Year	Number of Overnight Visitors (people)
2007	64,663
2008	59,988
2009	55,387
2010	50,342
2011	53,512
2012	52,060
2013	50,675
2014	51,196

Source: Yuwaku Onsen Tourist Association

\* In 2011, many guesthouse and hotel reservations were cancelled following the Great East Japan Earthquake. However, after *Hanasaku Iroha* was broadcast in April 2011 reservations recovered and dramatically increased.

Table 2: The numbers of visitors to the Yuwaku Bonbori Festival (the lighting ceremony and the main festival).

Date	Number of Visitors (people)
First lighting ceremony: 23 July 2011 (Sunday)	500
First main festival: 9 October 2011 (Saturday)	5,000
Second lighting ceremony: 22 July 2012 (Sunday)	1,000
Second main festival: 6 October 2012 (Saturday)	7,000
Third lighting ceremony: 21 July 2013 (Sunday)	1,000
Third main festival: 12 October 2013 (Saturday)	10,000
Fourth lighting ceremony: 21 July 2014 (Monday)	1,200
Fourth main festival: 11 October 2014 (Saturday)	12,000

Source: Yuwaku Onsen Tourist Association.

### Toward becoming an ‘authentic’, permanent festival

*Hanasaku Iroha* was broadcast on television between April and September 2011. The original story and animation production was by P.A. WORKS Co., Ltd., and production was by Hanairo Ryokan Kumiai (the name of the production committee). The heroine of the story is a female high school student who grew up in Tokyo, but through various circumstances came to live in a guesthouse run by her grandmother in Yunosagi Onsen (which was modelled on Yuwaku Onsen) to work as an apprentice *nakai*, a person who serves meals and attends to guests in their rooms in a traditional Japanese inn. It is the story of how she grows as a person while experiencing various difficulties. The anime depicts the Bonbori Festival as a traditional Yunosagi Onsen festival. The main event of the festival is the release of lanterns into the sky to serve as signposts for a deity, in the form of a small girl, to return to Izumo in Kannazuki (the tenth month of the Chinese lunar calendar). People write their hopes on ‘wish cards’ that they attach to the lanterns.

The Yuwaku Tourist Association had previously considered holding some kind of festival in the tourist low season of September and October. After obtaining the cooperation of the anime production company, the tourist association decided to recreate the anime’s Bonbori Festival on 10 September 2011, just after the anime’s broadcast, as an event to commemorate the third anniversary of a restoration project following flood damage in Yuwaku Onsen. In addition to members of the tourist association, the executive committee for the festival comprised representatives of the production committee and Kanazawa city. The aim was to create a genuine ‘regional festival’, which, while not large-scale, would continue indefinitely into the future as a small-scale event. The committee decided that the event should not damage the image of the anime work or the region, that it should be held on an on-going basis within the means of a small *onsen* district, and that it should be established in people’s minds as a traditional event of the region to the extent that they would be unaware that it was originally based on an anime. The tourist association also prepared for the festival rigorously in accordance with traditional local festival procedures. For example, the programme of the ceremony and Shinto prayers were determined by the Shinto priest with

jurisdiction over Yuwaku Onsen area. Moreover, on the day of the main festival in October, the Shinto prayers were offered by the priest as the most important ritual.

The paper lanterns were set up mainly within the grounds of Yuwaku Inari Shrine and the path leading up to it. The lighting ceremony was held on 7 July 2011 and the main festival on 10 September. At the lighting ceremony, guests were invited to light the paper lanterns and write *nozomi fuda*, 18 centimeters by 6 centimeters wooden tablets on which one's wishes are written (Figure 2). Then, for the main festival, local residents carried two boxes for approximately one hour in a procession along the streets of the *onsen* district. Fans of the anime and other tourists put *nozomi fuda* tablets, on which they had written their wishes, into the boxes. Then in the *onsen* district at the edge of Lake Gyokusen, the traditional ritual to see off a deity and the ceremony of burning of the *nozomi fuda* tablets were performed. The deity in the shape of a small girl lives in the Yuwaku Inari Shrine and she visits her home in Izumo (land of the deities) every October in the lunar calendar. Local people in Yuwaku give her a warm send-off by lighting lanterns on both sides of the approach to Yuwaku Inari Shrine. By burning *nozomi fuda* tablets, the deity can take the peoples' wishes with her to the land of the deities.

This story was originally created for the anime by the anime production company with reference to Japanese mythology and the wishes of the tourist association. It was unprecedented for a fictitious festival depicted in a work of entertainment, such as an anime, to be held as a regional festival initiated by the region itself. Consequently, it attracted much attention.



Figure 2: *Nozomi fuda*, a wooden tablet on which to write one's wishes

### **A bold decision to concentrate on the event itself without using PR**

A noteworthy point about the preparations for the Bonbori Festival is that both the region and production company clearly recognised what the event itself was and constructed a cooperative relationship to enable it to be successfully held as a genuine festival. The Japanese guesthouse industry comprises professionals in hospitality. It was decided not to provide any special services to guests visiting because of the anime work, but to afford them the same hospitality extended to all other guests. The production company, for its part, would create a high-quality anime work that



would be loved by its fans for a long time. Based on this idea, both sides shared awareness that it is important somehow to turn the fans of the anime into permanent fans of the region, rather than aiming for short-term economic effects.

Therefore, a brave decision was taken not to follow the usual path taken by many previous regional tie-ins with movies, dramas, and animes: the organisers decided not to hold grand promotional events at location sites and other large-scale regional events related to the work before it was broadcast, nor to offer special plans for anime fans, nor to stage an excessive number of events. Instead, the preferred approach was that anime fans visiting the location would slowly savour the *onsen* district and soak up the atmosphere of the anime-created world. For example, the tourist association would not help visitors work out where the locations shown in the anime actually were. This was being considerate in that it did not deprive fans the enjoyment of searching for the locations. It also had the effect of increasing the satisfaction they felt from simply walking around the town.

Regardless of the approach adopted, the actual setting of *Hanasaku Iroha* was an *onsen* guesthouse. Fans wanted to experience the *onsen* district as it was, without any alterations. Both the region and production side fully understood this. Around the country, there have been many examples of regional promotions tied to works such as movies, dramas and anime with the goals of promoting their region and tourism within it. In the Yuwaku Onsen case, short-term economic effects were eschewed and the approach adopted by Yuwaku Onsen deserves our attention for capturing the essence of such tie-ins.



Figure 3: Poster for the third Yuwaku Bonbori Festival 2013

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## Future Prospects

On the days of the festival, especially the main festival, many day-trippers visited Yuwaku Onsen in addition to those staying overnight in guesthouses and hotels. The capacity of the *onsen* district is small and parking spaces are limited, so it was important that Yuwaku Onsen was accessible by bus from Kanazawa city. The executive committee secured a temporary parking lot at Kanazawa University and arranged for Hokuriku Railroad to run a temporary shuttle bus service from there. In the first three years the festival was held it generated growing publicity and the number of visitors continuously increased, with visitors to the main festival totalling 12,000 people in 2014. In the future, providing parking spaces and ensuring access via public transport are going to become bigger issues. Furthermore, the festival has reached the stage at which the committee needs to examine the optimum capacity of the festival.

Whatever happens, it is noteworthy in this case study that the approach adopted by the region and the production company has generated a strong relationship of trust between three parties, resulting in the alignment of the interests of the region, production team and fans. The region has praised fans participating in the festival for their good manners and if this strong relationship between the three parties can be maintained, ways to solve any potential future problems will most likely be found. In the Bonbori Festival we have witnessed the creation of ‘new traditional culture’. It was possible to create a high-quality event because Yuwaku Onsen is a small regional town. This pioneering model will surely be an important example for other localities in the future.

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