

Kakufuzan Chinzoji Temple, where the legend of *Tsuru no Ongaeshi* (“The Gratitude of the Crane”) has been handed down through the ages.



Photo: Nanyo City

# The Home of Folk Tales about Cranes

Nanyo City in Yamagata Prefecture in Japan’s Tohoku region is known as the home of the folk tale *Tsuru no Ongaeshi* (“The Gratitude of the Crane”). We interviewed the director of the Yuzuru no Sato Cultural Heritage Museum, which was established to preserve the region’s folk tales for future generations.

(Text: Kato Yukiko)

In the western part of Nanyo City, Yamagata Prefecture, near the Orihata River, which flows through the Urushiyama district, there is a temple called Kakufuzan Chinzoji Temple (Buddhist temple), where the popular Japanese folk tale “The Gratitude of the Crane”<sup>1</sup> has been handed down through the ages. The area retains many place names evoking to the famous story, such as Tsuru-maki-

da (*tsuru* means crane) and Hane-tsuki (*hane* means bird feather), and prospered as a silk manufacturing town during the Meiji period (1868-1912). Today, a museum called Yuzuru no Sato (lit. “Home of the Twilight Crane”) has been established, where visitors can enjoy exhibits on silk spinning, oral performances of folk tales, weaving workshops, and other activities. We interviewed Mr. Yamada Kazuo, director of the Yuzuru no Sato Cultural Heritage Museum.

“In the folk tale of the crane’s gratitude handed down in this area, a man named Kinzo rescued a crane that children were cruel to, and the crane returned the favor by transforming into a woman and weaving for the man using her own feathers,” Yamada says.



Photo: Yuzuru no Sato Cultural Heritage Museum

Yuzuru no Sato Cultural Heritage Museum. The museum is about a 10-minute walk from Chinzoji Temple.



Photo: Nanyo City

Weaving looms at the archives center (Weaving workshops are also available.)



Photo: Yuzuru no Sato Cultural Heritage Museum



Above: A display that explains how a crane that transformed into a woman and became Kinzo's wife wove using a loom in the house.

Below: Local people who love folk tales take the lead in storytelling activities.

Although the details of the story vary depending on the literary sources and local folk tale, it remains widely known to children all over Japan through picture books and oral traditions as a folk tale that teaches valuable lessons. Yamada explains why.

"It is likely that this folk tale gained popularity because of its role in passing on lessons about the importance of keeping promises and helping those in need, and because the crane was a familiar bird before its numbers drastically declined through overhunting in the late 19th and early 20th centuries."

Yuzuru no Sato consists of two buildings: an archive center and a house of storytellers. "After the establishment of a mechanical spinning mill in 1873, silk manufacturing flourished as a local industry. In recognition of this history, the archive's center is a building we remodeled a white-walled warehouse for cocoons built during the Taisho period (1912-1926). At the house of storytellers, *kataribe* (storytellers) who

recount folk tales and legends from around the region tell "The Gratitude of the Crane" and other stories in an emotionally rich way."

At Yuzuru no Sato, visitors can watch the story video of "The Gratitude of the Crane" with subtitles in English, Korean, and Chinese (traditional Chinese characters). English brochures are also available. "We have visitors from overseas, too. Sometimes they share their impressions with us in the sense that paying back kindness is important. This feedback shows that they really understand the content of the story, which makes us very happy." We hope that many people will visit the place where the legend of the crane has been handed down from generation to generation, and enjoy the world of Japanese folk tales. 📺

1. A folk tale that has likely been passed down since the 15th century. Its author is unknown. As it has been retold through the generations in many regions of Japan, there are various theories as to the original story. Playwright Kinoshita Junji (1914-2006) published his play *Yuzuru* ("Twilight Crane") based on this story in 1949. It was later adapted into an opera in 1952. The Kabuki actor Bando Tamasaburo V also caused a sensation with his performance as the main character Tsuu.

Yohyo, a simple and honest young man who lives in a snow-covered village, saves the life of an injured crane. To repay his kindness, the crane transforms into a woman and comes to live in Yohyo's house as his wife, Tsuu. She uses her own feathers to weave a cloth called *senbaori*, or "Thousand Crane Feathers Weave," which she presents to Yohyo. Tempted by the prospect of selling her cloth for good money in the city, Yohyo demands that Tsuu weave more of it. Tsuu is disappointed in the money-obsessed Yohyo, but decides to weave the cloth, believing that Yohyo will return to the honest person he once was by

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### Synopsis of the play *Yuzuru* ("Twilight Crane") by Kinoshita Junji, based on the folk tale "The Gratitude of the Crane"

getting the *senbaori*. Although Yohyo has been warned by Tsuu not to look into the room where she is weaving under any circumstances, he cannot help himself and takes a peek, only to see a crane weaving a cloth. The next day, a thinned Tsuu hands Yohyo the cloth she has woven, bids him farewell, and flies high into the sky.

[Based on the introduction by the New National Theatre, Tokyo]

In the Urushiyama district of Nanyo City in Yamagata Prefecture, legend has it that the last piece of cloth left by the crane was offered to Chinzoji Temple as a temple treasure.