Japanese Nursery Rhymes (Dōyō)

Since around 1920, children’s songs created for singing to children have been called “dōyō” and before that, they were called “warabe uta.” Many reflect Japan’s landscape and customs, or have some kind of moral or message.

“Pass Through” (Tōryanse)

Toryanse is the title of a warabe uta that has been passed down since around 1800. It describes a 7-5-3 Ceremony at Miyoshino Shrine. The lyrics depict a conversation between the gate guard and a mother who has brought her child to the shrine.

Guard: Pass through, pass through!
Mother: Where does this narrow path lead?
Guard: The path leads to the shrine that honors the god Tenjin.
Mother: Let me pass through.
Guard: I can’t let anyone pass unless they have a reason to be here
Mother: I want to pay my respects in celebration of my child’s 7th birthday.
Guard: The path going in is easy, but the path back is scary.
Mother: I don’t mind if it’s scary.
Guard: Pass through, pass through.

7-5-3 Ceremony (Shichi-go-san Mairi)

This ceremony celebrates landmark birthdays in a child’s development. For boys it is age 3 and 5, for girls it is age 3 and 7. They are taken to the shrine to pay respects on October 15.

The God Tenjin (Tenjin-sama)

Tenjin is the deification of Sugawara no Michizane, a scholar from the Heian period (845 – 903). The Tenjin faith (within Shinto) worships the heavenly god Tenjin

Shinto Shrines (Jinja)

Shinto is the indigenous faith of Japan, and Shinto shrines are facilities where the religion’s gods are enshrined.

There are many different kinds of shrines, and many different kinds of gods. It is said there are “eight million gods” including a wide diversity of objects of faith that can change depending on the times and the government, including natural elements like mountains, rivers, lakes and swamps, folk gods, actual living people and animals, legendary people and imaginary things.
Shinto Shrine Gate (Torii)

The torii is located at the entrance to a shrine, and beyond it is the inner area which is considered a sanctuary where gods and spirits are calm. Torii gates play the role of separating the shrine grounds (i.e., the world of the gods) from the everyday world. There are several theories about the origin of the name (torii literally means “bird perch”) but its present form was established around the 8th century. One legend says the torii is the perch for the three-legged crow “yatagarasu” — a symbol of guidance.

Road Approaching a Shrine (Sandō)

The road approaching a Shinto shrine or Buddhist temple is called a sandō. The sandō starts at the first torii gate at the furthest point from the shrine or temple, and goes through the gate, and leads up to the shrine. In some cases the definition of the sandō includes the busy street outside the first torii.

Since the word sandō is a homonym for the Japanese word for “birth canal” (the path babies take when passing into the world when they are born) some people think of the path to the shrine as a symbol for being reborn and changing one’s thinking.

Red Lacquered Gate (Shumon)

Many torii gates at shrines are painted red. This red (vermillion) is said to hold various meanings including blood, the feminine, and protection against evil.

Shrine Fair (En’nichi)

A Shrine Fair is held at a Shinto shrine on a day when there is a special occasion relating to that shrine. For example, Tenmangu Shrine in Kyoto has a famous one on the 25th day of every month. These days, a shrine fair (en’nichi) is often used to refer to the shops and food stands that are set up at a shrine during a festival.

White Snake (Shiro-hebi, Hakuja, Byakuda)

This is an albino snake. Due to its rarity, it is considered an object of faith as an auspicious animal in various regions in Japan. It is famous as a servant of Benzaiten and a bringer of wealth, but it is also known as a water god. Suwa Taisha Shrine is a famous shrine that worships the white snake.
Careless (Ukatsu)

“Ukatsu” means to be careless. In the play, there is a "Careless Rooster" which comes from ancient Japanese folklore that comes from observing chickens, a "bird head who forgets after three steps" is someone who forgets what they have been told after walking three steps. This is where the name for the Careless Rooster comes from.

Guide Deer (Shirube no Shika)

There are many shrines dedicated to deer as the messengers to the gods. The origin of this is in the legend of the deer god Amenokaku no Kami, who was said to have brought a message from Amaterasu Okami to Takemikazuchi, to "Negotiate the transfer of the country to the main power." Deer are a symbol of protection and showing the way, so in this play, the deer is written as a role that advances the story.

Tanuki who controls the wind (Kaze-hiki no Tanuki)

Tanuki (a real animal, sort of a raccoon-dog) appears in many Japanese folk tales as a trickster, but is also sometimes depicted as a victim who gets injured or fooled. There is a legend that the tanuki can control the wind, and uses this power to change the weather, and so in this play the tanuki acts as someone who changes the scene.

Ah and Un

“Ah” and “Un” are Buddhist terminology. “Ah” indicates the first word, and “Un” indicates the last word. This also symbolizes the beginning and end of the universe. Sort of like Alpha and Omega. Shinto shrines are often guarded by two dog statues called “koma-inu” – one of which stands with an open mouth as if to say “Ah” and the other with a closed mouth as if to say “Un.” There is also a Japanese idiom, “breathing like Ah/Un” that means to have good chemistry.

Musical Accompaniment for Festivals (O-Hayashi)

This is music played by instruments like flutes and drums in 4/4 time.

Street Band (Jinta)

A Jinta is a street band made up of a handful of people that plays at circuses or at sales events to stir up the crowd.
Three Monkeys (Sanzaru, Sanen)

The three monkeys refers to a common motif of three monkeys that each use their hands to cover either their eyes, ears, or mouth. “See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil” is said to be the secret to wisdom.

In one staging of The Gate, our subtitle projectionist sat on the stage as the “Speak no Evil” monkey and operated the equipment for most of the show until suddenly she had a speaking scene, which was surprising for the audience, who had assumed she was just a technical crewperson.

Japanese Paper Folding (Origami)

Japanese paper folding (origami) is the traditional art of folding paper into shapes such as animals and everyday household items. The word origami can also be used to refer to finished folded paper pieces, or to the paper itself, a square paper made for the purpose of folding, which is also known as chiyogami. Traditionally, samurai used washi paper to wrap items, and these folding techniques filtered down to the common people in the form of entertainment.

Europe and other places have developed their own paper-folding customs as well, but the Japanese word and craft of “origami” can now be found around the world.

Paper Lanterns (Chōchin)

Chōchin are a type of lighting. They are made with a framework of split bamboo, which has paper or silk pasted to it to block the wind, and a candle is placed inside. They can be folded flat for storage. There are many different shapes.

White Facepaint (Shiro-nuri)

The Japanese tradition of painting the face white originated with the traditional theatre art, kabuki. The reason was to make their facial expressions clear to audiences even in dim light when performances were done by the light of torches. Later it became a symbol of the privileged class (their white skin implied they didn’t have to work hard outside in the sun) and nobility. The red, black, and sometimes blue lines seen in kabuki face painting, “kumadori” represents the movement of blood vessels and muscles in the face as it expresses the range of human emotion.

Apart from kabuki, women may paint their faces white when getting married, or when doing a ceremony at a shrine. The purpose of doing so originated with the intent of perhaps indicating a special occasion or obscuring their facial expressions.
Even today, the Japanese performing art of butoh is done by painting the entire body white, and 20th century playwright Shuji Terayama also developed a practice (different from kabuki) of painting faces white for his plays.