Hello everyone! "CIR's Corner" is my monthly article about international exchange and cultures around the world. I will introduce a variety of interesting international topics.

This Month's Topic: Saint Patrick's Day

Saint Patrick's Day is celebrated on March 17 every year. It is a day of celebration for Irish people and their descendants all over the world.

The day was named after the Catholic priest, Saint Patrick. He was born on the island of Great Britain during the Roman Empire. In the fifth century, he crossed the sea to Ireland, but at that time, Irish people practiced their own Celtic religion. Over many years, he converted thousands of Irish people to Christianity. He used the three-leaf clover, called a shamrock, to explain the Holy Trinity. There is also a legend that after a group of snakes attacked him, in retaliation he drove all of the snakes out of Ireland. Therefore, no snakes live in Ireland today. It is unlikely that Saint Patrick is actually responsible for the lack of snakes; nevertheless, he remains an important figure in Irish history and folklore. The date of his death, March 17, became a religious feast day and a national holiday in Ireland.

Saint Patrick's Day is not only celebrated in Ireland, but it is also celebrated in the US, Canada, UK, Australia, and other countries. In fact, it is the most widely celebrated national festival on earth. Why is an Irish national holiday celebrated in so many countries? The reason can be traced to famine. From 1845 to 1852, a fungus called potato blight spread across Europe and destroyed many potato crops. Ireland was hit the hardest, since potatoes were the staple food of most Irish people at the time. The harsh rule of the British government made the situation even worse. Millions of Irish people were poor, starving, and dying. Therefore, over one million people left the country to find a better life. Most Irish refugees fled to England, Scotland, South Wales, North America, and Australia, and they brought the Saint Patrick's Day traditions with them. Outside of Ireland, Irish people faced much discrimination and hatred, so the once religious holiday of Saint Patrick's Day became a day for Irish unity and cultural celebration in their new countries.

Saint Patrick's Day festivities became particularly large in the US, perhaps even larger than the festivities in Ireland. People eat Irish food such as corned beef and cabbage, and drink lots and lots and LOTS of Irish beer and whiskey. My Irish friend said that he would love to spend Saint Patrick's Day in America someday, because the parties look wild. Most cities also hold a parade. (Parades are held in Tokyo and Sapporo as well.) Many people dress up like leprechauns, which are a type of Irish fairy.

Green is the national color of Ireland, so many people wear green on Saint Patrick's Day. Bars serve green beer, and some cities even dye rivers green! When I was a child, we used to pinch our classmates who weren't wearing green on Saint Patrick's Day. When I first started school, I was unaware of the "game," and went to school wearing pink on March 17. By the end of the day, I was so sore from all the pinches that I never made that mistake again. ★

About Ireland

Ireland is an island located to the west of Great Britain. It is divided between the sovereign nation, the Republic of Ireland, and Northern Ireland, which is part of the UK. Ireland is about the same size as Hokkaido.

Nickname: The Emerald Isle

Capital: Dublin (Republic of Ireland), Belfast (Northern Island)

Official languages: English and Irish

Population: about 7 million (5.1 million in the Republic of Ireland, 1.9 million in Northern Ireland)

Countries with Irish heritage (% of population): Australia (30%), Scotland (28%), Canada (14%), America (11%), England (10%)

*My maiden name, Cooley, is an Irish name, and according to DNA analysis, I am 6% Irish!

Photos: irasutoya.com, Washington Post, and Wikimedia Commons