This year, as usual, the cherry blossom season has passed in the twinkling of an eye. Earlier this year I made up my mind to enjoy to my heart’s content the blossoming of the cherry trees from beginning to end. As early as in the first week of March, I began to take a regular close look at the cherry trees which stood in an impressive row in the park near my house. In the middle of the month, however, the bare branches still looked dead as if it were still mid-winter. There was no sign whatsoever that they would bloom. Then, in the last week of the month, a number of small lumps like buds appeared on the top of the branches. The tops of the lumps became green. In a few days they turned pink, and I knew that they were blossom buds. A week later they started to open.

Without doubt the blossoms were at their best during their first week. The pink-tinged white blossoms made a beautiful contrast to the dark brown tree trunk. Their beauty was short-lived, however. By the middle of April, the blossoms were past their peak. Some of them were left on the branches, but the beautiful colour contrast between the blossoms and the trunk, disappeared, as green leaves came out, and finally the blossoms themselves rapidly lost their beauty. The period between the opening and the peak of the blooming was no more than two weeks. In such a short time the drama, which can only be performed once a year, was over.

From March into April the cherry blossom front rapidly heads north along Japan’s extended archipelago. In each district the blossoming period is very brief. During this time, however, the mountains, fields and towns are all painted in pink-tinged white. The strongest appeal of cherry blossoms lies in their togetherness. Each blossom is
Living Japan

rather small, but, when a single tree, a row of trees and a large group of trees bloom all together, the blossoms become the most beautiful. When they are linked together and stretch like clouds or mist, we feel as if we have been magically transported into a dream world.

One day, I was surprised to find that a small tree in a corner of the garden, which I had not noticed before, was in fact a cherry tree, because it produced pinkish white blossoms all at the same time. Since it was usually ignored I imagined it wanting to assert itself once a year, just as modest people want to assert themselves sometimes.

I hear that foreign visitors to Tokyo this year were much impressed with the cherry blossoms. Boarding a coach they went from the airport to a hotel in the centre of the city. The coach drove along the Metropolitan Expressway, left the tunnel and at Chidorigafuchi passed beneath the canopy of cherry blossoms at their best. ‘How, fantastic!’ they exclaimed with one voice, expressing their admiration at the amazing sight. They could not contain their excitement for some time. It was the warmest welcome offered by this country. They were the luckiest visitors, indeed.

It is true, a lot of people in the world love flowers and blossoms. People in Europe maintain seasonal flowers along the streets and on window sills all year round, while we Japanese concentrate only on the cherry blossoms during the brief time in spring and, when they are gone, wait for them to come again the next year, without paying any particular attention to other flowers. Perhaps it is part of our national character only to enjoy the best flower at one particular time.

However, what I have just said is not true of all cherry trees in Japan. The truth is that I have only referred to one popular variety, that is, the Somei Yoshino variety. The old saying, ‘Blossoms are short-lived’ is particularly true of this variety. The blooming date of cherry trees forecast by TV is that of the Somei Yoshino kind. It is true that the Somei Yoshino variety is very typical, but there are other kinds of cherry trees, which come into bloom at different times. For example, the Kawazu-sakura variety starts to bloom in February. The blossoms of the Sato-zakura variety last until May. The fact is that the Somei Yoshino variety accounts for sixty to seventy per cent of all cherry trees in Japan.