

Community Connections

Community Connections is a quarterly column from Mark, our resident CIR (Coordinator for International Relations), to help you get more involved in the local community.

Can't go home? Enjoy the holidays in Japan like the Japanese

Improve your Japanese while you read! Find words in **bold and italics** in the **Vocab** box.

It goes without saying that this has been, to vastly understate things, an unusual year. With travel restrictions still in place, many of us who might normally return to our home countries or travel during the holiday season are stuck here in Japan.

Particularly during ***nenmatsu nenshi***, the end and beginning of the year, it can be lonely for those of us with no family ties in Japan. During ***o-shōgatsu***, shops close and families retreat to the home to spend time together.

For the rest of us, I have come up with some covid-secure ways to see in the new year and enjoy the season even if without the usual atmosphere that we might be enjoying in our home countries.

As always, use your own good judgement, avoid any setting that is ***mitsu***, and be sure to follow the latest official advice.

Go to a temple or shrine

Welcome in the New Year like a local, and visit a temple for the year's first prayer, ***hatsumōde***.

Shortly after midnight on New Year's Eve, temples will open their gates to the public and begin tolling a bell 108 times.

This is said to represent the 108 sins of man in Buddhism.



To get the full ***hatsumōde*** experience, why not get an ***omikuji***? It is said that an ***omikuji*** drawn during ***hatsumōde*** is your fortune for the whole year to come. Good luck!

Vocab

nenmatsu nenshi 年末年始

New Year's Eve and the three consecutive holidays following it. Literally "year's end, year's beginning."

o-shōgatsu お正月

The New Year's celebrations surrounding January 1 – 3.

Did you know? This was originally celebrated at the same time as Chinese and Korean New Year, which is referred to as ***kyū-shōgatsu*** ("the old New Year").

o-mikuji おみくじ

Written on these randomly drawn slips of paper, available at most major temples and shrines, are fortunes predicting your future.

Even N1 Japanese speakers may still struggle to make head or tail of the full fortunes written in archaic Japanese, but if you can find a Japanese native and ask nicely, they might let you in on what is to come for you.

Even if you don't know the details, temples

have a handy shorthand to give you the gist. Each omikuji has one of these words printed in large kanji:

大吉	吉	凶	大凶
great luck	luck	curse	great curse

If you want your fortune to come true, take the paper home with you and look after it. To keep it at bay, tie the paper to the nearby tree (or more recently, metal rack) provided.

Traditionally, this is a pine tree, because “pine” is *matsu* (松), a homophone of “wait” (待つ).

hatsu- 初

This prefix can be attached to just about anything to mean “for the first time.” You can ask your visiting friend “*Hatsu-Hiroshima?*” to mean “Is this your first time in Hiroshima?” You may also look back fondly on your *hatsukoi* (first love).

In addition to temple and shrine visits and sunrises, another popular belief surrounds the first dream of the year, *hatsuyume*. The belief in the power of dreams exists in many cultures, and Japan is no exception.

It is said that the most auspicious things to appear in your *hatsuyume* are, in order, Mount Fuji, a hawk, and an eggplant. I can't say I've ever dreamt of an eggplant in my life, let alone on the evening of New Year's Day, but the appearance of these are said to spell good fortune in the year to come.



mitsu 密

Famously coined this year by Governor Koike Yuriko of Tokyo, this one two-syllable word encapsulates settings that we should be avoiding to prevent the spread of COVID-19. It is shorthand for the three Cs, or *mitsu no mitsu*:

- *mippe* (closed-off, i.e. poorly ventilated)
- *missetsu* (close quarters, i.e. not social distanced)
- *misshū* (crowded)



Watch the first sunrise

New Years' in Japanese culture, as in many cultures, is all about new beginnings and “firsts” (*hatsu*): *hatsumōde* is the “first prayer,” and even the first laugh of the year is seen as important.

In a time like this when it's safest to be outdoors, why not find your favorite vantage point and watch the first daylight of the new year trickle over the horizon?

However you choose to spend the end of 2020, be sure to spend it safely and sensibly, and keep warm. I leave you with the Japanese greeting for the last time you see someone in the year: *Yoi o-toshi wo!*

Mark McPhillips, December 2020

This column is available on our website, at h-ircd.jp/en/guide/hiroclubnews-en.html

If you have any requests for content, please let us know via the contact details below.