

# TOKYO TALES

By Carole Hallett Mobbs

## Happy New Year!

As soon as the 25<sup>th</sup> December arrives, all Christmas goods and decorations are removed and New Year's decorations are displayed. *O-Shogatsu*, or the New Year is the most important and sacred festival in the Japanese year and is celebrated accordingly. The holiday lasts three days and is a family celebration.

New Year's Eve is seen as the culmination of a hard year's work and much effort is spent preparing for the coming year by thoroughly cleaning everything. This includes the whole home, clothes, and various spiritual matters. All duties should be completed by the end of the year and all debts repaid. The idea is to start the New Year afresh, in the home, body, and spirit.

Traditional foods are prepared to last over the holiday season. Each food has a specific and complex meaning and is eaten at a particular time during the holiday. One such item is a special rice cake called *kagami mochi*. This is made of very sticky rice, moulded into two balls, placed on top of each other and topped with an orange. Some are very ornate, like the one pictured above. Last year I bought a small one to try. When we came to eat it, many unsuccessful attempts were made to cut it before realising I had inadvertently bought an inedible wax model instead of a real one.

On New Year's Eve *Kadomatsu* appear at the front entrance of every building to encourage good luck into the house and to prevent evil spirits entering. These are beautiful arrangements of bamboo, pine and apricot or plum blossom. The decorations are placed in pairs on each side of the front door to ward off evil. Pine represents strength and longevity; the straight, unyielding bamboo symbolises resilience and honour, while the flowers blossom in winter, so they epitomise persistence during hard times. The ornament is bound with a new rice-straw rope called a *shimenawa* on which zig-zag strips of white paper have been hung. It's believed that no evil spirits can pass beyond the rope.

At midnight on New Year's Eve, everyone listens for the tolling of the *Tsuri-Gane*, the huge



bells at the Buddhist temples.

According to Buddhist beliefs humans have 108 sins, so if you hear all 108 chimes you are relieved of those sins. Most people visit their local shrine at this time. At the largest shrine in Tokyo, several million people visit over the holiday to throw coins to the front of the shrine as offerings. This sounds like a rather dangerous celebration but is, in fact, restrained and peaceful.

New Year's Day postcards are sent in much the same way as

our Christmas cards.

The Post Office guarantees that these postcards will be delivered on 1<sup>st</sup>

January by setting aside special post boxes and employing large numbers of extra workers to deal with the influx.

It is extremely important to start the

New Year as you mean to go on, so great importance is placed on 'firsts', and the New Year's first sunrise starts the tradition. All the 'firsts' are believed to be symbolic of the whole year ahead. Therefore, the day is expected to be full of happiness, free from stress and anger.

Another 'first' ceremony on 2<sup>nd</sup> January celebrates the first writing of the year, usually a beautifully calligraphic Haiku or poem and the first dream is yet another important symbol.

I hope your New Year is happy, peaceful and prosperous, and "*kotoshi mo yoroshiku o-negai-shimasu kinga shinnen*" - "I hope for your favour again in the coming year."

