



New Year Greetings

Welcome again, for the beginning of the fourth year of A Story A Week. I hope we can enjoy another interesting mix of topics during the coming months. Let's begin with a story about a new year custom - and no, I don't mean New Year Resolutions ... I don't think there is anything in my behaviour that I need to change!

Because I had read many books about Japan and Japanese culture before I moved here in 1986, I knew what to expect when new year came around. I had read about the custom of exchanging new year cards with friends and business acquaintances, and as we had made quite a few friends, and had a growing number of students in our home 'English school', I looked forward eagerly to what I would find in my postbox on the first morning of the year.

Adding to the anticipation was the 'knowledge' that many of the greeting cards would be hand-made woodblock prints! After all, many of my books had said things like '... most of these new year cards are lovingly prepared using traditional woodblock printing techniques.'

Well, as you can imagine, it didn't turn out quite like I expected. For one thing, we didn't actually receive all that many cards, which was a bit of a let-down, but what was more of a disappointment was that almost none of them were woodblock prints. My books had been out of date, and should have said something like '... most of these new year cards are made with a small desktop device called a Print Gocco!' And even that would now be incorrect, as the method of choice these days is of course the desktop computer printer.

But all is not lost. Although the number of people sending cards has indeed decreased from the old days, and the number of people making their cards with woodblock methods is now very small, I do still receive a number of them every year. I carefully store them in my drawers, and have by now built up quite a nice collection.

How about the other way around? Do I use a computer printer for making my own cards? Of course not! I came to Japan in the first place with the intention of learning 'all about' woodblock printmaking, so my own cards are always woodblock prints. But actually, I never make new year cards. Because the paper used for Japanese postcards is quite thick, and not conducive to delicate printing, I make my prints on good quality washi, and slip it into an envelope for mailing. As long as I mark the outside of the envelope with a 'nenga' marking, the post office will deliver these envelopes on the first day of the year, together with the more traditional cards from everybody else.

I do have to admit to a bit of a problem with my new year prints though. Because I am now a professional printmaker, I cannot send out prints that are carelessly made, or which look like they were just 'tossed off' as an obligation. They have to be carefully carved and neatly printed. And that of course means that they take quite a bit of time to produce. This year I went a bit overboard I think, because making my batch of a couple of hundred cards took nearly two weeks - time that I can not really afford to lose from my productive working hours!

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All I can hope is that the people who receive them will appreciate the effort that went into their production. The idea is to try and pass them the message that I appreciate their friendship and support, and this is one of the best ways to do that. And I suppose I have to admit that there is a bit of pride mixed in there too; I want them to see what a 'wonderful' job I can do.

Some things never change, do they ... the little boy shouting out to anybody who will pay attention ... 'Look at what I did, and I did it all by myself!'

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