



七福神 Shichifukujin

Shôgatsu (正月) is the largest holiday in Japan, and a large number of rituals are associated with this period, starting in December and continuing through until January. Traditionally December was a busy month, as everyone had to finish all business from the end of the old year to start the New Year in a new and fresh state of mind. Another word for December is *shiwasu*, or "master on the run", which means that during this month, even a wise master or a priest has to run because he has so many things to do.

In old Edo, December was the time for townspeople (*chônin*) to settle all debt. As during that period business was mostly conducted on credit basis, New Year's Eve was the last day to balance all credits and debits. Creditors were running to their debtor's house, and there are all sorts of tales, kabuki plays or *manzai* (漫才) comedies about debtors with numerous bad debts ingeniously trying to avoid payment of their bills at this time. The most famous story collection may be "Seken Munesanyô" (世間胸算用), a group of tales written by Ihara Saikaku (井原西鶴) in 1692, all taking place during the New Year's Eve.



Shôgatsu is also the time to undertake the *O-sôji* (大掃除), a major house cleaning. Each house, office, restaurant or workshop organizes such an event. At that time, Tokyo's sidewalks suddenly become congested with tables and chairs, kitchen hardware and all sorts of items pushed outside for an extensive scrubbing. Once the cleaning is done, houses and businesses are decorated. The most common New Year's decorations are pine and bamboo, sacred straw festoons, and oval shaped rice cakes, disposed at the front door.

Shôgatsu is also the time for *O-seibo* (お歳暮), the traditional year-end gift-giving tradition. The custom originates from the old practice of greeting the souls of one's ancestor's, where descendants gather together in a *bônen-kai* (忘年会) reunion and bring food to share with the departed.

December is also the time to write *nengajô* (年賀状), or New Year's cards, that have to be posted early enough to be delivered on New Year's Day.

Still, *shôgatsu* also has something of the Christmas magic: it is on New Year's Eve that the Shichifukujin (七福神), the Seven Gods of good-fortune will traditionally appear in Japan, to dispense happiness and luck to worshippers. The seven gods are lead by **Daikoku** (大黒天) on top a pair of rice-bags and **Ebisu** (恵比寿) with his big *tai* fish (sea bream) under his arm and a fishing rod in his hand. Their companions are **Hotei** (布袋), with a large belly, a bag on his back and a fan in his hand, **Fukurokuju** (福祿寿) with a long head and attended by a crane, a deer or a tortoise, **Bishamonten** (毘沙門天) clad in armor with a spear and a toy pagoda, **Jurôjin** (寿老人), a sort of second Fukurokuju, and **Benzaiten** (弁財天, or Benten), the only female in this divine assembly, who has the power to give victory, riches, eloquence and wisdom.



These gods come from the Indian and Chinese pantheons, except for Ebisu, who can be considered a genuine Japanese *kami*. Daikoku, and Bishamonten come from Brahmanism and were adopted by Buddhists, Benzaiten was originally the Indian goddess of water, Fukurokuju and Jurôjin come from Taoism in China and Hotei is believed to be based on a Chinese Zen monk named Qici (契此, Jp. = Kaishi) from the 10th century, who became a saint. It is generally believed that these seven became recognized as a group in Japan between the Muromachi and early Edo periods.

The popular motif of the seven gods riding on a "treasure ship" (*takarabune*), with the ideogram *takara* (宝) on the sail, could come

from the belief that wealth would be brought to Japan from across the sea. Around Edo a large number of shrines and temples dedicated to one of the Shichifukujin around Tokyo made this region known for its *Shichifukujin-mairi*, or pilgrimage to worship the seven deities of good fortune, during the New Year season.

Today the seven gods are still popular, and the tradition of visiting temples and shrines to pay respect to the *Shichifukujin* during the first days of the New Year is well alive. From these sanctuaries families will often bring back a talisman (*engimono*), representation or symbol of the *takarabune*, as, since the Muromachi period it was believed that sleeping with an amulet of the *Shichifukujin* under one's pillow would bring auspicious dreams and luck and happiness for the rest of the year. On New Year's Day, children will often receive a red envelope with a *takarabune* picture and containing a little gift of money, or *otoshidama* (お年玉).



Set of sake cups (*sakazuki*) decorated with the *Shichifukujin* in takamakie (high-relief gold lacquer)