



New Year's Events

By KARLEE KEYSER February 2016

New Year's celebrations in the U.S. mostly involve time spent with friends while drinking champagne (or your drink of choice) and watching fireworks live or on TV. In Japan, many people watch the TV show, NHK *Kōhaku Uta Gassen* (NHK紅白歌合戦), while waiting for the countdown to midnight at the very end. Others go to their favorite Shinto shrine to countdown, and bring in the New Year with an offering, prayer, and purchase of special shrine items. The first such shrine visit of the new year within the month of January is called *hatsumōde* (初詣), and the countdown to midnight on New Year's Eve is a new addition to this old tradition. Some things that people buy during their shrine visit are *hamaya* blessed arrows, *omikuji* paper fortunes, sweet *amazake* rice wine, and *ema* wooden boards on which to write prayers or wishes. As 2016 is the Chinese year of the monkey, many *ema* feature a monkey's image, such as in the above photo.



While *hatsumōde* is well-known by many people, smaller celebrations around the New Year also exist. Miyajima's *chinka-sai* (鎮火祭) – intended to ward off accidental fires for the year – is one such event which seems to remain relatively unknown outside of local island residents despite its location on the ever-popular Miyajima. Luckily, the *Hiro Club News* publication makes this kind of insider information accessible in English. ;)

Following the first of January, many communities choose to put on *tondo matsuri* (とんど祭り) in which New Year decorations of pine branches, *daidai* bitter oranges, *shimenawa* straw ropes, *shide* paper streamers in a zigzag shape, etc., are burned to ash. As one of the event organizers at a local *tondo matsuri* told me, the higher the smoke and debris fly up on the waves of heat, the more likely it is that the gods will hear everyone's wishes and help them come true.

Hatsumōde, *tondo matsuri*, and other year-end or New Year celebrations are a great way to meet people in your neighborhood and become a familiar face. I believe that many of them, in fact, are intended just for this purpose! In which case, why not take advantage of them and bring in the New Year in the Japanese fashion? ☺