



Japanese Kites at the New Year



Why do Japanese children fly kites at the New Year? Isn't it too cold then? Maybe there is even snow on the ground.

Before 1873 the Japanese used a lunar calendar to mark time. A lunar calendar follows the cycles of the moon instead of the sun. The lunar New Year would usually fall sometime during the solar month of February. The Japanese thought New Year was the first day of spring. Boys would be given kites to fly as New Year's gifts.





Look at this Japanese print from 1850. The artist calls it "Spring Festivities." Kites fill the air. Mr. Fuji is in the background. One boy tries to pull down his friend's kite. He tosses a rock on a string toward the kite line. Other people are dancing or playing music.

We can tell this scene takes place at the New Year. There are stalks of bamboo to the right. In front of them are pine branches. Together, bamboo and pine branches make a *kadomatsu*, a decoration for the New Year. The *kadomatsu* stands for what people hope will come to them in the New Year. The pine is a symbol for long life. The bamboo is a





symbol for wealth because it is strong and tall and has sturdy roots.

To the left is another New Year activity. A group of children watches a lion dancer. The lion dancer grabs the head of one child in its mouth. That child will have good luck in the new year. Even the dog joins in the fun.

Look for another children's favorite in the middle of the picture. Boys gather around a candy seller's cart. The candy seller is blowing a sugar treat. He is like a glass blower, but he works with sugar syrup. Children can eat these treats when they cool and harden, or they can play with the treats for a while. Candy blowers still work at Japanese fairs and festivals today.



One boy in the group holds a rectangular kite. The face of a monk, Daruma, is painted on the kite. Daruma brought Zen Buddhism to Japan more than fifteen hundred years ago. His brow is wrinkled because he is thinking hard.

The Japanese now celebrate the New Year on the first day of January. Children receive *otoshidama*, small gifts of money from relatives and friends. Electronic games and television programs are now more popular than older pastimes. But kites are still given as gifts by people who like to honor traditions. And children go outside to fly them in the cold, brisk winds of winter.

*Images of Japanese kite prints from Japanese Kite Prints: Selections from the Skinner Collection by John Stevenson (2004).
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