

Fortune Comes in by a Merry Gate

Time has flown, and now there's very little of 2025 left to go. How did your year turn out? The start of the new year, *o-shōgatsu*, is a very special time for Japanese people. So for this article, I'd like to talk about some traditional Japanese *shōgatsu* games, and their possible origins.

○ Hanetsuki (badminton)

The act of hitting the shuttlecock back and forth in *hanetsuki* is thought to ward off evil spirits and demons on New Year's Day. What's more, the shuttlecock itself, traditionally a soapberry, is said to represent good health and peace, its Japanese name *mukuroji* literally meaning "may the child not fall ill and grow up healthy". It can be played in two ways, either seeing how many times you can hit the shuttlecock on your own (*agehane*) or by two people hitting it back and forth (*oibane*).



○ Flying kites

A *tako* is a kite made from paper and fabric stretched over a frame. You pull it with a piece of string, and use the wind to fly it high in the sky. There are many varieties of *tako* sold, from the traditional Japanese *tako* in the shape of a *yakko* (Edo period servant) with his arms spread, to more recent ones featuring popular characters. The *tako* originates in China, and was introduced to Japan as a divination and religious tool. In the Edo period, they were seen as good luck charms for warding off evil spirits and making prayers.

○ Fukuwarai

A person is blindfolded, and must try to place cut-out eyes, mouth and nose onto the outline of a face drawn on a piece of paper. The fun part is the finished result, which ends up being a face that makes you burst out laughing. Fukuwarai's status as a *shōgatsu* staple is supposedly linked to the saying "fortune comes in by a merry gate". The meaning of the proverb is that a house that's always filled with laughter will naturally be visited by good fortune.



May 2026 be a year filled with smiles and laughter for all of you!

※The original Japanese version of this article will be uploaded onto the website of the Miyazaki International Foundation soon.

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