



# IJSRM

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF SCIENCE AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

An Official Publication of Human Journals



Human Journals

**Review Article**

January 2021 Vol.:17, Issue:3

© All rights are reserved by Jun Kobayashi et al.

## Unique Way to Spend the Year-End and the New Year in Japan



**IJSRM**  
INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF SCIENCE AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY  
An Official Publication of Human Journals



**Jun Kobayashi\*<sup>1</sup>, Keiichi Ikeda<sup>2</sup>**

*<sup>1</sup>Faculty of Nutrition, University of Kochi, 2751-1 Ike, Kochi, Kochi 781-8515, Japan; <sup>2</sup>Faculty of Pharmaceutical Sciences, Hokuriku University, 3 Ho, Kanagawa-machi, Kanazawa, Ishikawa 920-1181, Japan.*

**Submitted:** 05 December 2020  
**Revised:** 25 December 2020  
**Accepted:** 16 January 2021

**Keywords:** New Year's Holidays, New Year, Homecoming, Religion

### ABSTRACT

New Year's holidays in Japan are very different from those in other countries. Schools and workplaces are often closed all at once. During that time, many Japanese return home and spend time with relatives and family. Since the store clerks also spend time with their families, the stores too are often closed. This is the period when bank ATMs also cannot be used. Public transportation does not stop, but it follows holiday schedule. Such customs are unique to Japan, and it is unlikely that other countries would concentrate on such activities once a year, especially at the end of the year. This article considers why such customs exist in Japan.



HUMAN JOURNALS

[www.ijsrm.humanjournals.com](http://www.ijsrm.humanjournals.com)

## INTRODUCTION

The first month of the year is January, also known as Shougatsu in Japan. However, Shougatsu may refer to only the holiday period from January 1 to 3 (or up to January 7, depending on how long the celebrations last).

The year-end and New Year customs in Japan (mostly common to all from December 29 to January 3) are very different from those in other countries. The situation differs depending on where one works (difference between private and public institutions, and business types), but mostly everyone takes a break together. People who are away for work or education often return home and spend time with their families. In many cases, these are the only days of the year when the family members come together (Figs. 1-2). It is only at this time of the year that convenience stores are closed for a full or partial period and ATMs and banks are not operational for several days. For this reason, there are rush demands on December 28, such as purchase of large quantities of New Year products and cash withdrawal. Public transport operates on holiday schedule, even on weekdays. In particular, on December 31, some regions operate overnight for shrine visitors. Such customs are similar to those observed during Chinese New Year and Christmas in France; however, New Year's holidays seem to be unique to Japan. This article outlines the movement of people during the year-end and New Year's holidays and discusses the reasons behind such movements.

### Holidays in Japan

For children going to school or kindergarten, in addition to weekend breaks and short-term breaks such as national holidays, there are also long holidays such as spring breaks (late March to early April), summer vacations (late July to early September), and winter holidays (late December to early January).

The length of the holidays varies as the type and quantity of content to be learned differ according to the school type. However, for adults including parents of children, the situation is different. In the case of working adults, generally, weekends, holidays, Bon holidays (summer vacation), and New Year holidays are common (Table 1). In Japan, the Labor Standards Law stipulates that basic working hours are eight hours a day and 40 hours a week. Thus, in many

workplaces, people work from Monday through Friday, with two days off on Saturday and Sunday. However, in the service industry such as restaurants, customers are expected on holidays; therefore, the staff takes a break on some other day. Bon holidays are mostly observed for about 5 days in July-August (up to 9 days when combined with weekends). Bon is a Buddhist custom. There are legends that the ancestors' spirits return to this world during the Bon festival. People use this time to recuperate during the hot summer months. They return to their parents' house and visit the graves of their ancestors. Depending on the sect and region, Bon festival is divided into a new Bon (observed around July 15) and an old Bon (observed around August 15). Further, depending on the type of workplace, one may have to take a break all at once in a week (often around August 15 in Japan). It is normal for medical professionals to take their break in parts, instead of all at once, even if the duration of time off is same (Fig. 1). Thus, only the New Year's holidays can be considered a period of simultaneous rest (at least for most people in Japan). Even in a hospital, it is extremely common for employees other than emergency staff to be on holidays. In the past, the New Year's holidays was the time most often devoted to returning home as described in the Introduction (Fig. 2). It was customary for the media to report at this time every year the traffic congestion on highways and crowded public transportation such as the Shinkansen. In recent years, however, families have often chosen to travel abroad, and the departure rush at international airports has been widely reported in the media. A small number of people may not be able to take a break due to work or may travel from city to a rural town (not necessarily their hometown) and take a break.

### **Why the New Year's holidays are unique in Japan?**

As mentioned earlier, public transportation during this period is crowded as a large number of people travel to rest and take time off. At other times, the holidays including the Bon holidays are divided across periods, hence, traffic congestion is not very bad. These holidays are a mix of different types, such as 1) public holidays, 2) school holidays, and 3) year-end and New Year's holidays.

As for public holidays, strictly speaking, only January 1 is a holiday. However, there are many occupations that conventionally allow for a break before and after January 1. The period from December 29 to January 3 is considered a holiday. As per tradition<sup>2-4</sup>, from December 29 to 31,

people thoroughly clean their homes and cook Osechi cuisine (food served during the New Year's holidays; long-lasting dishes are prepared that can be eaten during the New Year; these dishes are packed in a heavy box and served to visitors come to express New Year wishes; most of these dishes signify a prayer for longevity, prosperity, success, *etc.*). People listen to the temple night bell on December 31 (one of the annual events held during the year-end and New Year's holidays as per Japanese Buddhist tradition; around the midnight of New Year's Eve on December 31, the temple bell is tolled). In the morning of January 1, people go to shrines and temples for hatsumode (first visit of the year to a shrine or a temple). From January 1 to 3, no one goes to the kitchen to cook and everyone eats pre-made Osechi cuisine and rice cakes (it symbolizes rest). A decoration called kadomatsu (gateway pines) is displayed outside the door. These all are traditional customs. However, in recent years, shops are closed only on January 1 and remain open for rest of the holiday period. Convenience stores now do not close on New Year's holidays as the number of families buying Osechi cuisine rather than making it at home is increasing<sup>5</sup>. Therefore, there is not much to do during the New Year's holidays. This may be one of the factors behind the choices other than coming home.

As for school holidays, as mentioned earlier, there are winter holidays for children at the same time as the New Year's holidays. The fact that not only children but also parents are off from work at the same time seems to make it easier for families to return home or travel abroad. As many workplaces are closed all at once, it is easy to take a long vacation without any hesitation (although some Japanese workplaces are said to be hard in giving time off). Children get money from relatives in the form of New Year's gift (as everyone is on vacation, relatives gather to take time off). Traditionally, children engaged in activities such as kite flying, top-spinning, Karuta (a card game), Hanetsuki (a badminton game), Sugoroku (a board game), and Fukuwarai (lucky face-making game) during holidays. In recent years, however, it has become more common for children to play computer games indoors rather than playing outside.

Regarding year-end and New Year's holidays, it is difficult to think of celebrating the New Year as a cultural custom or taking a break following the likes of a private company. However, many people who work in public institutions in Japan take holidays at the same time as those who work in private companies. Further, a coming-of-age ceremony to celebrate turning 20 is also held in January in Japan, though not in the beginning of the year. We believe that it is not only

because of the “Coming of Age Day” holiday in January, but also the fact that the holiday is close to the New Year’s holidays, that increases the chances of returning home.

### **Examples from other countries**

The Chinese New Year in Chinese civilization<sup>6</sup> is an example of one such holiday. Chinese New Year is the Lunar New Year in China and Chinese civilization (Chinese New Year 2020 falls on January 25). This is the most important holiday in Chinese civilization and is celebrated grandly compared to the New Year in the calendar. Several national holidays are observed in nine countries and regions, such as Singapore and the Republic of Korea, as well as China and Taiwan. In China, the Chinese New Year is a national holiday, and a new “Labor Contract Act” enacted in January 2008 stipulated a three-day holiday to celebrate the Chinese New Year. Since 2015, the holiday period has been extended to seven days starting from the Chinese New Year’s Eve. Traditionally, an absolute cleaning is performed on December 24 of the lunar calendar (one week before the Chinese New Year) to celebrate the gods. On Chinese New Year’s Eve, families get together for a special dinner and eat dishes such as chicken and fish. Paper decorations are put on the entrance and windows of the house. Firecrackers are burst to get rid of evil and greet the gods. Traditional art forms such as lion dances are performed. Further, messages are shared for the long life of the elderly, and with neighbors and acquaintances to celebrate the Chinese New Year. Children are given New Year’s gift in red envelopes. People prepare and wear new clothes for the Chinese New Year. This not only adds glitz to the New Year but also brings good luck. This is the time when people spend time with their family, hence, there is much traffic before and after this period. However, an increasing number of people are now traveling for sightseeing during the Chinese New Year’s holidays. In Japan as well, the number of Chinese tourists around the same time increased close to the 2010s. In February alone, the number of visitors to Japan exceeded one million. Many people now send greetings of the Chinese New Year through telephone or the Internet instead of visiting directly. These customs are similar to those in Japan except for the date. However, New Year’s Day is also celebrated in Chinese civilization, though the customs are different from those in Japan. In Japan, people participate generously in religious events regardless of their religion. The Japanese have a culture of celebrating the New Year, regardless of whether they are Buddhists or Christians.

Christmas (December 25) is a very important day in Catholic countries such as France<sup>7,8</sup>). In France, Christmas is a day of family gathering and celebration, like the Japanese New Year. On December 24, as in New Year's Eve in Japan, shops close early, and most shops remain closed on December 25. People often spend time with friends during New Year's holidays, and no shops are open on January 1. There is no excitement like the Japanese New Year. In recent years, more and more people in France have stopped identifying themselves with Catholicism, hence, they may not celebrate Christmas with their families. In Japan, there is a perception that Christmas is a romantic day for lovers, not family members. Many Japanese people also participate in Christmas celebrations. Although not similar to New Year's holidays (Fig. 1), many people have the habit of enjoying Christian events such as Valentine's Day (February 14) and Halloween (October 31).

## CONCLUSION

Majority of the Japanese take off during the New Year's holidays and spend most of their time with their families. This is an annual custom that takes place around January 1. This Japanese custom is very different from that in other countries. However, there are people such as those engaged in businesses related to shops, transportation, medical institutions, etc., who cannot take a rest as others during this time. The reason why many Japanese people take time off at the same time have been discussed. It may be that the Japanese have a mild religious outlook and a cultural background to enjoy many religious events on a daily basis. There have been discussions about avoiding such overconcentration of holidays. It was thought that traffic congestion could be overcome if public servants are first targeted and are allowed to take long holidays at different times. However, there are many industries that make lots of profit only at this time of the year. It is undeniable that some people consider spending time with their family only during this time. Even public servants may want to participate in the event as followers of a religion (Fig. 3), which has not yet been realized. Although there is the problem of congestion, the custom has been observed until now. As can be seen from the recent increase in purchase of Osechi cuisine and changes in children's play, the possibility of going abroad as a family in the future is expected to increase (for the travel industry, the demand for transportation during this time will increase, and the prices of transportation and hotels will rise). While accepting such gradual changes, we hope to continue our traditional Japanese events and culture (Fig. 3).

REFERENCES

- 1) New Year National Survey 2018. Database about New Year, Kibun's New Year, <https://www.kibun.co.jp/knowledge/shogatsu/database/2018research/> (browsed February 2020).
- 2) Yoshie Niizawa, Kiyomi Nakamura. (2001) Changes in traditional custom eating Osechi, a special dish of New Year. *Journal of Cookery Science of Japan*, 34 (1), 89-98.
- 3) Keiko Hatae, Kumiko Iijima, Fumiko Konishi, Sonoko Ayabe, Tomoko Murakami, Midori Kasai. (2003) Custom of eating “Zoni” on New Year’s Day. *Journal of Cookery Science of Japan*, 36 (3), 234-242.
- 4) What is New Year? What kind of event is it originally? Seasonal topic, published January 2, 2015, <http://shunnowadai.com/archives/1248.html> (browsed January 2020).
- 5) Yuko Washimi. (2013) Perception and reality of New Year's event meals based on family structure. Session ID: 2P-9, Abstracts of the Annual Meeting of the Japan Society of Cookery Science, 25 (0), 157, [https://www.jstage.jst.go.jp/article/ajscs/25/0/25\\_157/\\_article/-char/ja/](https://www.jstage.jst.go.jp/article/ajscs/25/0/25_157/_article/-char/ja/) (browsed January 2020).
- 6) Liming Liu, Noriyoshi Washio. (2009) The New Year Events in Japan and China. *The Bulletin of Chuo-Gakuin University Man & Nature-*, 29, 3-22.
- 7) Introducing how to spend the New Year in the United States! What is the difference from Japan? Burepure.com, <https://burepure.com/annualevents/1519/> (browsed January 2020).
- 8) How is Christmas spent in Japan different from other countries? France Walking, <https://france-sanpo.info/archives/3321> (browsed February 2020).

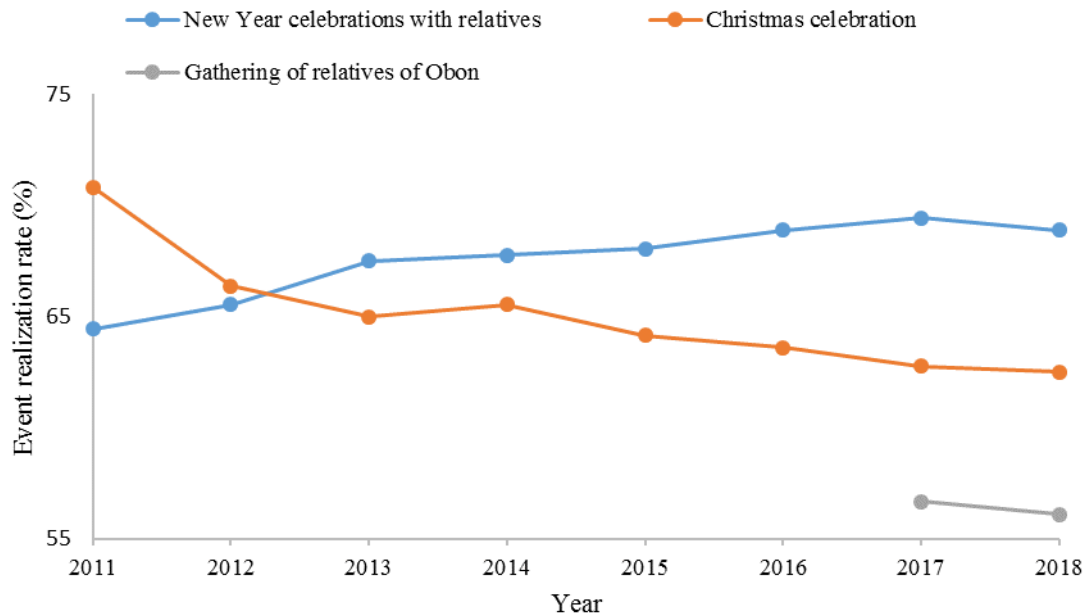
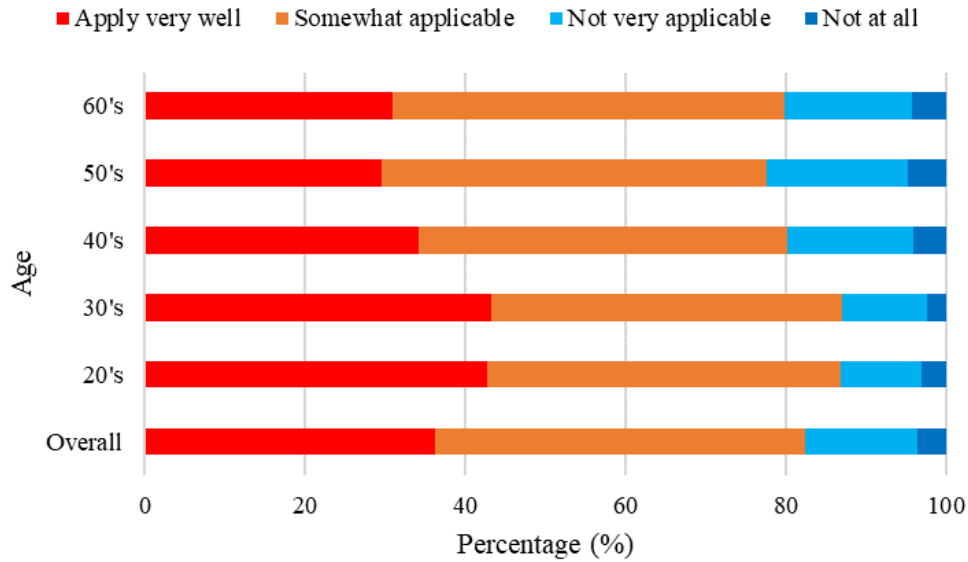


Figure No. 1: New Year, Bon, and Christmas event realization rate

Conducted online surveys of 5,726-7,016 housewives in their 20s and 60s during 2010-2018.

(Based on the data in Reference 1).

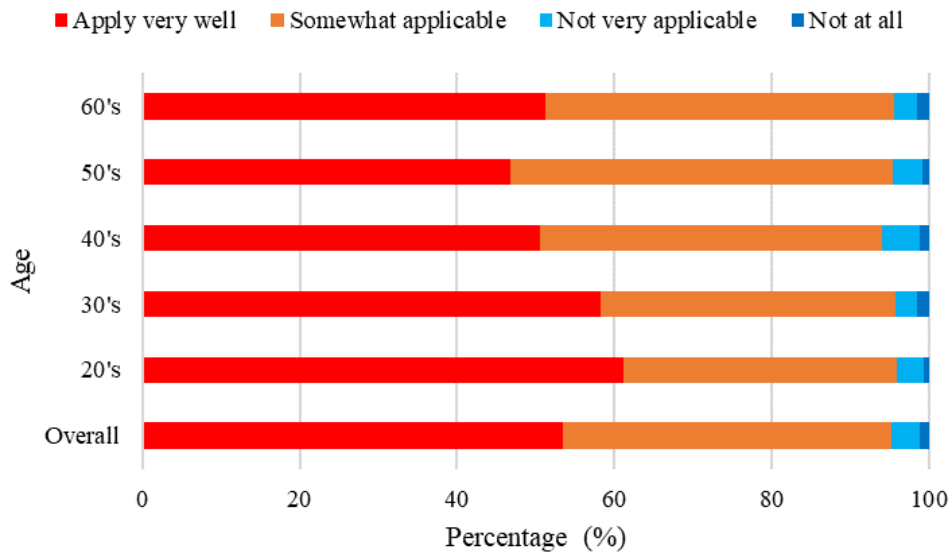


**Figure No. 2: Questionnaire result 1**

Questionnaire: Do you want to spend the New Year together with the whole family?

Conducted online surveys of 7,015 housewives in their 20s and 60s in 2018.

(Based on data from Reference 1).



**Figure No. 3: Questionnaire result 2**

Citation: Jun Kobayashi et al. *Ijstrm.Human*, 2021; Vol. 17 (3): 187-196.



Questionnaire: Is New Year one of the most important events in Japan?

Conducted online surveys of 7,015 housewives in their 20s and 60s in 2018.

(Based on data from Reference 1).



**Table No. 1: Examples of events in Japan**

| Month     | Events (red letters are holidays)                 | Participation  | Have more than a few days off  |
|-----------|---|--|--|
| January   | New Year's Day<br>Coming of Age Day               | ◎<br>Δ (Only new adults)                             | ✓  |
| February  | Valentine's day                                   | ○  |  |
| March     | Doll Festival<br>Graduation Ceremony<br>White Day | ○<br>Δ<br>Δ  | ✓ (Students only)  |
| April     | Entrance Ceremony                                 | Δ  | ✓ (Students only, before the ceremony)   |
| May       | Children's Day<br>Mother's Day<br>Golden Week     | ○<br>Δ<br>◎  | ✓ (If the holidays are continuous, both adults and children)                                   |
| June      | Father's Day                                      | Δ  |  |
| July      | Bon   | ○  | ✓ (By industry)  |
| August    | End of War  | Δ  | ✓ (Children have their summer vacations)   |
| September | Respect for the Aged Day                          | Δ (Some people who respect the aged)                 |  |
| October   | Health and Sports Day<br>Halloween                | Δ<br>Δ   |  |
| November  | Culture Day                                       | Δ (Only families with children 3,5, and 7 years old) |  |
| December  | Christmas<br>New Year's Eve                       | ○<br>◎   | ✓ (Children have their winter vacations)<br>✓ (Considering to be continuous with the New Year) |

The list does not include all public holidays.

Only those events that are celebrated by relatively many people in Japan are extracted.