

‘Even a piece of paper has two sides’: multi-scalar cosmologies of Japanese New Year cards

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Annually on 1 January, Japan’s efficient postal system circulates 2.5 billion New Year cards to arrive simultaneously in every home in the country. Based on ethnographic fieldwork around Osaka, this article investigates the continued popularity of this exchange of paper forms in an age of smartphones and fast internet connections. Extending recent anthropological scholarship about digital data, I argue that these seemingly trivial cards have transformative potential. They are active, potent participants in the cultivation, accumulation, and ongoing care of multiple networks of social, economic, and spiritual relationships. Through an analysis of the material and aesthetic qualities of the cards, I highlight how their front-back design embodies co-existing, but contrasting, dimensions of Japanese relations along a qualification-quantification and personalization-standardization axis. The cards also produce depth and scale by linking intimate, domestic concerns with larger political and economic interests, while weaving together multiple temporal dimensions. Ultimately, they exemplify how the manipulation of surfaces can have profound cosmological consequences. These cards possess a spiritual and social potency that generates an all-encompassing, intimate closeness that yearly rejuvenates society by reconstituting individuals as part of the whole.

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12年前の娘の絵です。

勝手ながら今年で年賀状を終わりにさせていただきます。

今年もよろしくお願いします。

Happy New Year

This sketch was made by my daughter (Nao) 12 years ago.

Please allow me to stop exchanging New Year cards.

I look forward to your continued goodwill in the coming year.

In 2020, the Year of the Rat, Miyako-san, a 53-year-old part-time coffee-shop employee and housewife from Nara, circulated ninety-three copies of this card to her extended network of family and friends. The card joined approximately 2.5 billion other New Year cards that the Japanese post office delivers annually, simultaneously, on the first day of the year. This astounding number roughly translates into 100 cards entering every Japanese home. Cards sent to the same address arrive in the form of one stack, held together with a rubber band, which are further divided into smaller stacks for different family members. On the morning of 1 January, the air is full of anticipation. When will the cards arrive? How many will there be? What will people have come up with this year? The number of cards each person receives reflects changing involvements in multiple social networks, whether personal or business-related, which, in turn, depend on age, gender, and social status. Thus, while teenagers, like 15-year-old Kuni, may receive a dozen or so cards, Nishiki-san and Oishi-san, middle-aged housewives, collect about 100 cards, and a company boss, such as Tanaka-san, or a university lecturer, such as Takahashi sensei, men in their sixties, can amass close to 1,000, mainly work-related, cards. These numbers are easily eclipsed by the numbers received by famous public figures or celebrities, who pile up tens of thousands of cards.

Size matters, and large stacks indicate the successful accumulation of relationships that continues to be linked with what it means to be a thriving adult in contemporary Japan. The masses of cards bring to mind competitive public displays of material and social wealth that anthropologists have studied in many other cultural contexts. Iconic examples are piles of yams on the Trobriand Islands or heaps of pigs in Papua New Guinea, which reference male prestige and political power, and which are shared with spiritual beings and redistributed amongst those present. Japanese New Year stacks differ in that they are firmly embedded in domestic practices, yet an element of public rivalry remains. On 1 January, neighbours witness the arrival of the postman or -woman (possibly several times throughout the day) and the size of the load carried does not go unnoticed. The material impact of relational success was brought home to me when I expressed my admiration for the size of Takahashi sensei's 2013 stack, and his wife, Chiyuki-san, casually shrugged her shoulders, saying, 'A few years ago, our mailbox actually broke'.

New Year stacks visualize and confront each recipient with the totality of their relations. They are devices to measure relationships and, thus, invite comparison with a ubiquitous twenty-first-century practice of quantification called 'self-tracking'. The growing social science literature about this phenomenon tends to focus on wearable computing to quantify and optimize bodily functions from heart rate to menstruation patterns, which is increasingly employed by institutions to promote behavioural change (Fors, Pink, Bell & O'Dell 2020; Kristensen & Ruckenstein 2018; Lupton 2014). New Year cards, however, quantify social relations, and they are, therefore, more akin to 'social tracking', collecting and counting friends and followers, which users of digital platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram, engage in. The growth of these digital quantification practices is often associated with the neoliberal project, which embraces new technologies to measure every aspect of social life and reduces human complexity, ambiguity, and uncertainty to numbers and data (Findeis *et al.* 2023: 2301-2). The process is also said to promote a particular type of personhood that stresses self-realization, autonomy, and choice at the expense of sociality and community. The rise of this so-called quantified self is further linked with the creation of ranking systems (and



Hirahara-san and Tsuyama-san, retired men in their late sixties, compare their stacks. In 2017, the former received 250 cards, while the latter's pile contained 200. About 75 per cent were work-related.

algorithms) that can easily be hijacked for corporate profit and state control (Sharon & Zandbergen 2016: 1698).

Based on long-term ethnographic research I conducted between 2009 and 2019 in the urban area around Osaka,¹ this article debunks these claims. It questions whether quantification impacts negatively on the relation between self and society and results in the manipulation of personal motivations for state and commercial interests. Japanese New Year cards are non-numerical measurements. Each card is a singular unit of data that allows Japanese people not only to describe and re-create social relations but also to measure closeness, especially amongst distant or dormant relationships. The multi-scalar layers of visual and textual information imbued in New Year cards may be more difficult to access and analyse for patterns than digitized data, but I argue that they are a form of data, nevertheless. My framing of the cards in this way has been influenced by a 2021 special issue of the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* focusing on the anthropology of data, in which the editors acknowledge the continuity between digital technologies and other informational forms, such as bureaucratic documents, saying that what data is 'can change depending on the use to which it is put, or when one asks' (Douglas-Jones, Walford & Seaver 2021: 10–11). They recognize the 'present data moment', but they also stress the 'multiplicity and particularity' of data and the need to decentre 'the focus on Euro-America' (2021: 16).

This article focuses on a non-digital form of data in a twenty-first-century, non-Euro-American context. I, first, demonstrate that New Year cards play a significant role in the yearly, nationwide regeneration of social life in Japan, with every adult citizen expected to invest time and money in producing a single card that is circulated to all their relations. I agree with Douglas-Jones *et al.* that although social practices of quantification might be 'seductive because they simplify and reduce social life', they are also used to 'figure life as extremely complex' (2021: 13). Indeed, in what follows, I aim to show how the cards measure and maintain relationships across multiple scales, from the personal to the cosmic. Their exchange is also fraught with tensions and ambiguities that reflect changing ideas about kinship, friendship, and gender relations in contemporary Japan. Miyako-san's 2020 card, with which I started this article, for example, contains a heartfelt plea 'to be allowed to cease participation' in

the nationwide event. She clarified that what drove her to circulate this message was that 'in recent years I primarily communicate with real friends through LINE and SNS. People that I sent New Year cards to are not really that close and I have therefore come to think that this kind of exchange is not that meaningful any more'. Miyako-san states her preference for 'real' friends whom she regularly meets face-to-face and talks to using text messages and LINE, the Japanese WhatsApp, as opposed to more distant social relationships that are embodied by New Year cards. Other participants expressed a similar desire to end 'troublesome', even 'heartless', cycles of exchange. Even so, surprisingly few managed to follow through. Why does the majority of the Japanese population feel obliged to continue to participate in this ritual? Why in an age of smartphones and the use of ever-faster internet connections does the mass circulation of these paper objects remain ubiquitous?

This article, second, explores the notion that data is 'a social process with political overtones' (Douglas-Jones *et al.* 2021: 12). I argue that the New Year card phenomenon is an important economic and nation-building activity that challenges the presupposition that sociality and community action are necessarily suppressed by institutional demands and financial concerns. To guarantee their delivery on 1 January, cards have to be posted by mid-December, and in the weeks (for some, even months) leading up to this deadline a frenzy of card-related activities erupts. New Year cards sustain an array of businesses, ranging from paper and craft shops and providers of painting and calligraphy lessons to photo studios and computer and software manufacturers. The main beneficiary of this mass ritual of exchange is Japan Post, with an excess of £1.5 billion generated from the sales of cards alone. This iconic business, to date still partially owned by the Japanese state, provides the infrastructure, the products, and the knowledge necessary for the successful enactment of the group-affirming exchange, while also tuning into the changing needs and expectations of individual citizens. New Year cards invite good fortune, and Japan Post offers a unique example of a commercial infrastructure sustaining this sacred economy.

To develop the points above, I analyse the distinctive aesthetic qualities of the cards. I take my lead from Riles's seminal monograph *The network inside out* (2009), in which she sets out her theory of the aesthetics of information artefacts. Riles argues that informational forms produced by Fijian female activists 'generate the effects of their own reality by reflecting on themselves' (2009: 3). Like woven bamboo mats exchanged at local ceremonies, the aesthetic forms circulated in global networks are two-dimensional devices characterized by the repetition of correct patterns. The artefacts embody an inside-outside sensibility that corresponds to how transnational and personal relations are understood to overlap: 'each serves as the inside or the outside of the other' (Riles 2009: 69). From the viewpoint of one, both seem incomplete as personal relations become shallow and larger networks become rigid. I argue, similarly, that the informational forms at the centre of this article are two-dimensional aesthetic devices that generate an all-encompassing (spatial and temporal) effect of intimate connectedness, while reflecting on Japanese citizens who create, circulate, and use them. Like Riles's networkers, participants in my research are primarily concerned with the aesthetic of form, and through an analysis of shapes of words and images made on ephemeral paper artefacts, I aim to challenge deep-rooted Euro-American ideas about surfaces and depth. This approach reveals further synergies with current anthropological debates about data that urge us to pay 'attention to the persuasiveness of form ... beyond representational paradigms' (Douglas-Jones *et al.* 2021: 17).

Unlike the Fijian documents, Japanese New Year cards have a front-back relationality that operates within a larger part-whole dynamic, foregrounding either quantity in stacks or qualities of individual cards. The structure of this article mirrors my participants' engagements with New Year cards in their homes over the course of one year. I zoom in on three key moments in the life of a stack when it is disassembled into individual cards and the front-back mechanism can be observed. During the first days of the year, after the initial excitement about quantities of cards contained in stacks subsides, individual cards are touched, turned, and passed around, while stories and memories about senders are shared. The focus is on visuals and texts added to the front of each card (Side 1). Standardized shapes that index shared ideas about kinship, friendship, and patron-client relationships are offset by fleeting, handwritten words that evoke intimacy. Every card is examined a second time in mid-January when the New Year lottery results are released. Attention shifts to the back of the cards (Side 2), which embeds people in larger economic, political, and spiritual networks of support, while creating affectionate bonds of belonging between citizens and the state and an intimate co-presence between humans and spirits. Finally, at the end of the year, people sort through their stacks a final time, assessing relations made present on both sides of the cards, before participating in a new cycle of exchange. I argue that through these repeated back-and-forth movements, combined with oscillating processes of qualification-quantification, the mundane paper entities at the centre of this article are transformed into active, potent participants in the cultivation and ongoing care of multiple networks of relationships distributed in space and time that are crucial for the (symbolic) reproduction of social, spiritual, and economic life in contemporary Japan.

Side 1: Imbued with heart (*kokoro komotteiru*)

I am extremely excited (*wakuwaku*). Well, I really can't wait to see what everyone will send me this year.

Kameko, 51 years old (Osaka, November 2018)

Each year, every Japanese adult is expected to produce one New Year card and circulate identical copies to all their relations. Unlike 'Western' seasonal greeting cards, which generally are folded paper artefacts sent in envelopes, Japanese New Year cards (*nenga hagaki*) are standard, 10 by 15 cm, pieces of paper that resemble what in the United Kingdom would be called 'postcards'. The most popular cards are sold at post offices. They are made of inexpensive 'ink-jet' paper and cost 50 yen (36 pence) each. The backside consists of a number of pre-printed, standard elements linked with their efficient distribution, such as a stamp and small rectangular boxes for entering the senders' and recipients' postcodes. The front is left blank because it is to be personalized by senders with texts and images. Most carry two texts: in large print, Happy New Year wishes, such as the formal '*kinga shinnen*' or the colloquial '*akemashite omedeto gozaimasu*', and, in a slightly smaller font, thanks for favours received in the previous year. Each card also contains a visual representation chosen by the sender.

Depictions of the zodiac animal linked with the upcoming year used to be ubiquitous, but contemporary cards may carry a variety of images, ranging from famous *anime* and Disney characters to boy bands and sports teams. Many people choose templates listed in catalogues (printed and online) offered by the post office and a range of competitors, such as stationery shops, software companies, and photographic studios. About two-thirds of the cards in stacks I have analysed contain photographs. The digitalization of photography and the widespread use of computers and cheap

colour printers since the late 1990s has allowed senders to select, manipulate, and print cards containing photographs quickly and cheaply at home. The majority of participants expressed a dislike for these kinds of cards, voiced either as '*jiman*' (bragging) or as '*hazukashii*' (embarrassing). Cards with photos depicting children, but also those showing personal achievements, lavish trips abroad, or encounters with famous people, were considered boastful. Embarrassing photos tend to reveal too much information about one's private life, such as middle-aged couples being touchy-feely in front of the camera. Both types of photo disrupt the ideal sender-receiver relationship based on a delicate balance between sharing (personal) information and showing consideration (Daniels 2009a). The mismatch of expectations between senders and recipients happens against a backdrop of ongoing societal changes. It is also a direct consequence of circulating one identical card to every relation.

The disconnect between the normative sociality that the cards are associated with and the lived experience of many Japanese people was best illustrated by several childless, unmarried women in their forties who participated in my study. While sorting through their stacks, showing me card after card with photos of happy, smiling children, many rolled their eyes and shrugged in resignation. Shigeko, a single kindergarten teacher in her mid-forties in Osaka, summed up the mood, commenting: 'This is an extremely common pattern ... yes, yes, look, look, ... see they all arrive! Well, this year was really a peak'. Participants were more positive about cards with photos depicting highlights in a family's year. Although such cards could easily be categorized as *jiman*, their attractiveness lies in the fact that the same format is repeated yearly and each card thus forms part of the ongoing, unfolding story of a particular family. Over the past fifteen years, the Nishikis in Nara, for example, have produced the same photo collage showing the four family members enjoying important milestones, trips abroad, and everyday activities.



The Nishikis' Family New Year card from 2012 (left) and 2017 (right).

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Eleven-year-old Nao's drawing on the Matsui family New Year card (left) and her grandmother Murashima-san's 'hand-made' card for 2010 (right).

Cards that carry original artwork using techniques such as calligraphy, ink painting, water colouring, or stencilling are also liked. They are called 'hand-made' (*te-zukuri*), a term that generally refers to a combination of labour conducted by hand and with machines, such as computers and printers. Murashima-san, a grandmother in her late eighties from Nara, happily volunteered to demonstrate this hybrid production process as she (1) produced several ink drawings of a tiger, the zodiac animal for 2010; (2) selected one to be scanned and printed on expensive Japanese rice paper on her daughter's computer-printer combo; and (3) completed each printed card by adding colour 'by hand'. The ubiquity of these hybrid techniques shows that the value of most cards is linked less to the creativity of the maker than to the time and effort senders invest in producing their creations. Sacrifices of money are also appreciated, and it was common for participants to touch and comment on the thickness of the paper, which might be high-quality photographic paper or hand-made Japanese rice paper as opposed to 'cheap' ink-jet paper used for standard cards.

My analysis of stacks suggests that the majority of New Year cards are generic, commercially produced items. However, by adding 'a few words' (*hitokoto*, literally 'one word'), any card can be infused with affective qualities. As Kameko, a single woman in her early fifties, put it, 'Even cards with photos become interesting if people add a few words (*hitokoto*)'. Common examples are: 'Are you ok? I haven't heard from you in a while?', 'Please take care of yourself' or 'I hope we can meet again soon'. These messages are a kind of 'phatic communication'. Their content is not particularly profound, but they signpost that the sender continues to be invested in the relationship. It matters that *hitokoto* are handwritten.²

I was repeatedly told that, by inserting these short handwritten messages, any card can be 'imbued with heart' (*kokoro komotteiru*). *Kokoro* literally translates as 'heart', but it is a form of human interiority linked with sentiment and spirit as well as will or mind, thus transcending any affect/rationality dichotomy. Like the language used in the Fijian documents studied by Riles, *hitokoto* are appreciated as 'shape, rhythm and feel, not simply [as] meaning' (2009: 80). The form and feel of the words embody *kokoro*, and they epitomize how the manipulation of surfaces can be efficacious. Lebra holds that because *kokoro* is considered to be 'free and spontaneous', it is associated with 'truthfulness' and 'moral superiority' (1992: 112). A pure heart is essential for



The back side of a standard New Year card.



The Sakais' stamp sheets from the Year of the Dog, 1982 (top), 1994 (middle), and 2006 (bottom).

empathetic interpersonal communication because it can remove barriers linked with the rules of social relatedness (1992: 113).³ More recently, in her study of intimacy in Japan, Tahhan has argued that 'heart-to-heart communication' (*ishin denshin*) may induce a deep state of closeness without physical or visual touch (2014: 114-15). Similarly, *hitokoto* are fleeting utterances of affect that ease people's hearts and connect sender and recipient in an intimate space, even when they are not physically together. Next, I explore how New Year cards expand these feelings of connection and belonging to the whole nation.

Side 2: Sharing the nation's wealth

At the end of the New Year period, on 3 or 4 January, stacks are stored away, but in mid-January they re-emerge, and individual cards are scrutinized a second time. On this occasion, the focus switches to the backs of the cards, which consist of the following standard elements: (1) in the top left corner, a prepaid stamp, depicting a lucky motif in red ink; (2) underneath the stamp, the characters 年賀 (*nengajishi*), 'New Year's Greetings', and the year concerned; and (3) at the bottom, a strip of numerical information that enables the recipients to automatically participate in a nationwide lottery draw with results announced around 15 January. Each lucky strip consists of three rectangular blocks. Those on the left and right contain numbers and letters printed on a watermark,

while the block in the middle consists of an artistic interpretation of a lucky motif with the words '*otoshidama*' (お年玉). This term, a combination of the words '*toshi*' (year) and '*tama-shii*' (soul), is commonly used for pounded rice cakes (*mochi*) that were – and still are – given as offerings to the New Year deity at religious institutions to invite good fortune for the coming year. Portions of these *mochi* cakes are shared (*osagari*) amongst the local community to partake in the luck generated. Similarly, during the New Year period, it remains common to offer 'mirror-rice cakes' (*kagami-mochi*) to the protective spirit of the house. These rice cakes consist of a stack of two round rice cakes with a bitter orange placed on top. Towards the end of the festivities, portions of these cakes are shared amongst those living under the same roof by using them in soups and other dishes (Daniels 2009c). Over time, the domestic practice of sharing lucky cakes at the start of the year has diversified into parents (and other adult family members) giving a small token of money, also called *otoshidama*, to children.

While we sorted through the Sakais' 2010 stack of cards in their home in Osaka, Mr Sakai, a retired businessman in his late sixties, started to carefully spread out a series of *pochi bukuro* on the table in front of us. These are small envelopes with New Year decorations and the word *otoshidama* printed on them. He explained that they used these envelopes to give New Year's money to their children, continuing that the 'New Year cards lottery is called *otoshidama* because someone of high status gives money to someone lower; in this case, Japan or the state gives to its citizens'. Through the lottery, the Japanese postal service and, by extension, the state, which has owned only one-third of the business since 2007, share their good fortune (or huge profits) with the rest of the population. Each year, an impressive range of prizes⁴ are given away, but most lottery winners only receive a 'token' share of the nation's wealth in the form of two zodiac stamps embedded in an ornate paper sheet. These stamps look identical to standard New Year stamps, which are circulated during the festive period, but they are also collectables that most participants in my research held on to. Mrs Sakai, for example, proudly showed me her large collection of stamp sheets dating back to 1971, the year she was married.⁵

Through their association with the post office lottery, New Year cards are entangled in complex economic and political processes in the modern Japanese state. During the 1870s, to assert their political and economic control, the Meiji rulers reformed the feudal postal system, which was built along five major highways that connected Tokyo with other urban centres (MacLachlan 2011: 25–30).⁶ A new network of post offices, run by locally influential postmasters, drove the expansion of the road and rail network, the diffusion of the telegraph and telephone, and an increase in newspaper publishing and distribution (2011: 48–50). The post office became the country's main financial institution (2011: 52) and played a social welfare role, offering health services, pension plans, and even humanitarian disaster relief.

In December 1949, when the country was still in ruins following the Second World War, the post office started the first New Year lottery. In the immediate postwar period, the Japanese government prioritized economic growth by assisting businesses rather than directly improving the well-being of ordinary citizens. At that time, one card cost 3 yen (about 2 pence), while the first prize was a sewing machine, which was a luxury item retailing at 20,000 yen (£140). During the mid-1950s, workers' incomes rose and the emerging middle class was encouraged to save (into post office savings accounts) to buy consumer goods through instalments (Gordon 2006: 144). The government drew on these savings to provide industry with cheap loans that stimulated further

economic growth (Akaishi & Steinmo 2009: 227). From the late 1950s, New Year card sales were used for nationwide gift-aid campaigns for charitable causes, ranging from welfare activities for the elderly and the disabled to the preservation of national treasures. Although the Japanese economy has been in recession since the mid-1990s, these charitable activities continue. In 2011, for example, the victims of the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami were its beneficiaries.

The image of the post office as a trusted public institution that offers indispensable financial and social services (MacLachlan 2011: 57) was (and still is) particularly strong in rural areas. In cities, it is primarily large commercial companies that offer their employees generous benefits for housing, healthcare, and retirement (Akaishi & Steinmo 2009: 228–9). The conservative Liberal Democratic Party, which has ruled Japan for most of the postwar period and whose main electoral base consists of rural populations and small business owners, has repeatedly misused the post office for political gain. Nevertheless, many contemporary Japanese people continue to view the institution with a mixture of national pride and nostalgia. This explains the fierce opposition against its privatization, a process that partially started in 2007 and has led to the growth in partnerships with the private sector. Postal services have also been streamlined and diversified. An innovative example is a New Year card service advertised as ‘inviting luck into business’ (*shōbai hanjō*) that allows companies to promote goods and services on cards that are automatically added to the stacks of people living in specific neighbourhoods. Most recipients tolerate these ‘junk’ cards because they increase the chances of winning the *otoshidama* lottery.

The lottery motivates many participants to keep on circulating New Year cards, and online businesses, such as LINE, have slowly increased their share of the market by selling virtual *otoshidama* cards. For as little as 10 yen (9 pence), senders can enter recipients into a LINE New Year lottery draw. Interestingly, LINE also draws on the idiom of ‘*kokoro komotteiru*’ to advertise this service, suggesting that senders can express their ‘true feelings’ by letting recipients partake in the company’s accumulative good fortune. To date, the LINE lottery has not approached the status of the post office draw, and the physicality of paper cards continues to matter. New ways of doing things do not necessarily result in the replacement of existing practices (see Ferguson 2011), and Japan offers many examples of how the new comfortably sits alongside the old. For example, although the country is seen as a global pioneer in artificial intelligence, robotics, and other innovative digital developments, many Japanese people continue to embrace analogue technologies, such as fax machines or cassette tapes. I have already shown that recipients value the effort going into the production and circulation of paper cards and that handwritten messages are associated with true feelings. Through repeatedly handling these rectangular pieces of paper inside their homes, participants measure, compare, and sustain multiple networks of relations that are distributed in space and time. Sharing paper cards affords multi-sensory encounters amongst family members. Even for those living on their own, the physical disassembling and reassembling of stacks of cards may generate competitive feelings, comfort, and connection.⁷

I would like to end this section by returning to the larger political and economic context in which New Year cards are embedded. Over the past seven decades, the Japanese state, through its proxy Japan Post, has orchestrated this mass ritual of exchange. By selling and circulating billions of cards every year, it makes significant financial gains. By symbolically redistributing the nation’s wealth (through the



Postman delivering cards on the morning of 1 January 2019 in Osaka.

otoshidama lottery), the (imagined) community of Japanese citizens is successfully (re)produced. The New Year card phenomenon facilitates the symbolic replication of existing structures of domination. However, taking my cue from data anthropologists again, I do not treat New Year cards as merely 'second-order representations'. In the remainder of this article, I 'bring the data forward, switch ground and figure' (Maurer 2021: 174-5), highlighting how the cards' spiritual and social potency may reduce anxiety about the future.

The post office and the lucky economy

More than 70 per cent of all images (whether illustrations or photographs) added to the New Year cards I studied referenced lucky zodiac animals (*eto*). Through their association with the zodiac, the cards are embedded in a sequence of twelve years that is repeated five times, corresponding to the five elements, to generate sixty-year cycles of growth and decay. Most contemporary Japanese people anticipate calamities and misfortune throughout the year, and through observing recurrent patterns in the universe, one may predict and influence one's destiny.⁸ Particular care is needed when transitioning into a new year, and at the end of December, people will cleanse their homes but also themselves and their businesses (e.g. by paying off outstanding debt). The exchange of zodiac animal images forms part of these rituals to invite good luck for the coming year. Similar to other Japanese lucky objects, the efficacy of zodiac animals is linked with their form instead of their substance (Daniels 2003). Zodiac shapes have a built-in obsolescence. Like a battery, they are 100 per cent charged at the start of the year but over time their energy diminishes, and at the end of the year they need to be replaced by the next, fully loaded animal in the series.

Over the past few decades, the circulation of lucky shapes between religious institutions and private homes has slowed down or stagnated (Daniels 2003; 2009b). Ongoing urbanization and the decline of neighbourhood cohesion throughout the postwar period have eroded the role temples and shrines play in people's everyday



(Left) A post box with slot for New Year cards only on the left. (Right) A postman collecting mail in Osaka (31 December 2018).

lives. Growing economic instability, rising unemployment, and the disintegration of stable family life since the 1990s have also had a significant impact.⁹ The fact that many contemporary Japanese people only visit temples or shrines during the New Year period is indicative of this change. However, there has not been a complete breakdown in communication between humans and spirits. Lucky shapes are also circulated by commercial companies as ornaments, functional objects, or motifs covering other commodities. The scale of the New Year trade in zodiac animals exemplifies the successful intertwining of commercial and sacred economies (and infrastructures) in Japan. Indeed, as I have previously argued (Daniels 2009c), in contemporary Japan, many rituals only continue to be relevant and popular because of the ingenuity of the business world.

The yearly exchange of Japanese New Year cards demonstrates that the commercial infrastructure of circulation may also play a pivotal role in circulating spiritual energy. In order to circulate billions of lucky cards on the first day of the year, the post office maintains an impeccable material infrastructure. New Year cards produced by Japan Post are on sale from 1 November, but the official start of the 'New Year cards acceptance' is mid-December. Around 15 December, a 'special slot for New Year cards' is added to post boxes across the country and volunteers (generally students) are drafted to work long shifts assisting with the selling, sorting, and delivering of the cards. No effort or resource is spared to guarantee that all cards that are posted by 25 December and carry the word '*nenga*' or 'New Year's greetings' are delivered on 1 January.¹⁰ On the first day of the year, an army of postmen and -women set off on bicycles, on motorbikes, on foot, and in cars to deliver their heavy loads. The hustle and bustle around post office depots contrast sharply with the eerily empty city streets, as businesses are closed and citizens are cocooning inside their homes.

Contrary to examples in other cultural contexts (see, e.g., Ishi in India), my Japanese case study shows how the coming together of human-made and spiritual systems of circulation can have positive socio-magical effects. Japan Post, the largest financial institution in the country and an important motor of the national economy, has successfully adapted indigenous rituals employed to disseminate good fortune amongst local communities to circulate New Year cards on a national scale. At religious institutions, rice cakes exchanged with spirits are transformed into lucky forms that are subsequently divided and shared with local people. The post office's efficient

infrastructure has made it possible to share the good fortune and wealth of the nation among Japanese citizens. Popular Shinto is not only 'polytheistic and pantheistic'. It is also intensely local, with *kami* spirits being specific to a particular place (Clammer 2004: 94-5). It is this latter characteristic that the centralizing state struggled with when it used Shinto for political purposes at the end of the nineteenth century. An 'abstract notion of land' linked with the Japanese nation as a whole did not sit well with local people having 'spiritual rights' to specific locations (Clammer 2004: 95). By contrast, the state-sponsored *otoshidama* lottery, introduced when the country started to recover from a long, atrocious war and subsequent foreign occupation, was embraced by Japanese citizens because it emulated deep-rooted ritual practices enacted to create solidarity amongst local communities. The cards are what Navaro-Yashin has called 'affectively charged phenomena' (Navaro-Yashin 2012: 125) that engender positive political effects, such as feelings of national belonging (Herzfeld 1997).¹¹

New Year cards are standardized two-dimensional paper objects, and these properties enable them to travel easily to every corner of the Japanese archipelago by means of a well-oiled postal infrastructure. However, what is truly remarkable is that the final leg of their journey is carefully orchestrated for their arrival to occur simultaneously on one day. On 1 January, the cards join all Japanese citizens together in a national habitus, while also making present events and entities that are distributed across time. There is an apparent analogy between New Year cards and Melanesian kula shells as self-extending transactions that generate a specific 'mode of spacetime' (Munn 1986: 10). However, I refrain from this kind of framing because it also invites comparison with currency and generally results in a critique of quantification. By contrast, Walford has urged that production and resource extraction are disentangled from reproductive processes. Through comparing data with biological reproductive materials, such as ova and genes, she conceptualizes it as a 'form of potential ... a social relation that has not happened yet' (Walford 2021: 127-8). New Year cards are valued for their creative production and intimate expressions of care. Next, I demonstrate that they also have the potential to be transformed into something else. They contain a promise of future relationships.

The promise of future relationships

In Japan, acts of exchange connect humans, spiritual, and natural worlds. By participating in multiple exchange networks, one can ascertain that relationships continue into the future and influence one's destiny (Daniels 2010: 84-5). The exchange of New Year cards embodies the minimum social requirement, especially for more distant relationships, to maintain a basic level of sociality that can be intensified at any time. The cards thus establish the social foundation necessary for enacting other exchange relations throughout the year.¹² In his ethnography of Chinese divination practices, Stafford described how his research participants aimed to control their destiny by employing two kinds of 'pattern-recognition exercises'. They studied patterns in the universe, such as the zodiac motifs that I have discussed above, but also patterns of interpersonal relationships, which are closely associated with the principles of reciprocity that organize social life (Stafford 2007: 59). Similarly, in Japan, there are strong 'expectations about patterns that relationships follow over time' (2007: 63). New Year cards are embedded in the life cycle, and they are a yearly, reoccurring feature in every Japanese person's life from early childhood until death.



Murashima-san's (left) and her granddaughter Nao's (right) card designs for 2019. The *hitokoto*, written in black ink by Nao's mother, Miyakosan, reads: 'Happy New Year. Please come again to Japan in the winter'.

Children start participating in the exchange of cards from a very early age. Before they can read and write, this is primarily an exchange between mothers or mothers and teachers. From elementary school and as they become teenagers and university students, young people exchange New Year's greetings with friends. The three Kudo children in Osaka exemplify current practices. In 2015, 15-year-old Kuni and his 18-year-old sister, Yukiko, exchanged fifteen to twenty physical cards, while their 17-year-old brother, Yoshihiko, only reciprocated with digital greetings. Nao, a 20-year-old, used to exchange cards with her high school friends, but since she started her degree in print-making at university, she only shares her original design of a zodiac animal with friends digitally via LINE. Her exquisite boar design for 2020 is shown above, on the right.

It is possible that this generation of young people, who grew up with digital technologies, will start to embrace paper cards as they age. Many participants claimed they only became properly involved in the yearly exchange once they joined the workforce, when they became fully fledged citizens and their social networks expanded rapidly. Marriage is another common entry point, and newlyweds tend to use their first New Year card to inform people of their new address. For others, it was the arrival of children that made them commit to participating in the exchange. As people age, the images on the cards they receive change. Women of childbearing age can expect images of children. For recipients in their fifties and sixties, hobbies and travel are the main focus, while zodiac animals are a popular default for those over 60.

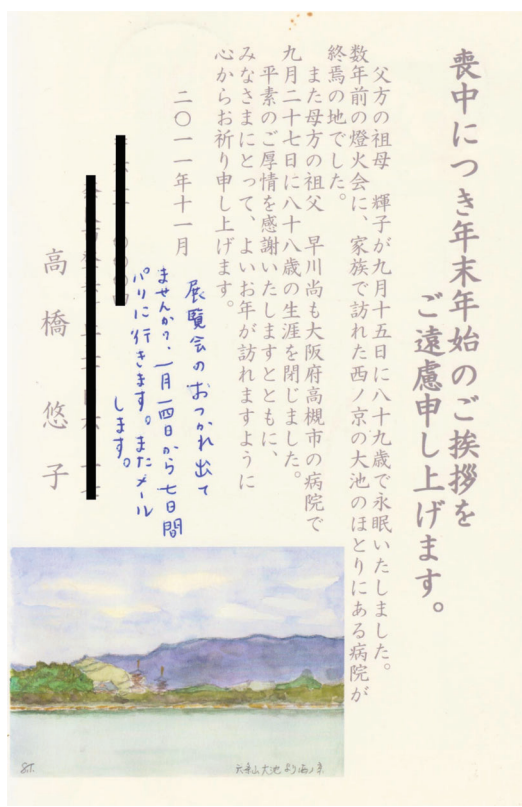
Some participants expressed genuine affection for the ritual, expressing their joy in creating and receiving cards. Chiyuki and Yuko Takahashi, mother and daughter, for example, revelled in designing their cards, and by mid-November they would already have trialled numerous designs. In 2018, both women were still adjusting to living together in their two-storey family home in Nara after three of their co-inhabitants, Mr Takashi and both his elderly parents, passed away within the past seven years. Similarly, Kameko, a single woman in her early fifties who works as a media researcher

in a large utilities company, takes great pleasure in the exchange, calling her card 'my personal artwork to express true feelings with'. For her and many other single middle-aged women, the cards carried positive connotations of friendship and potential future sociality. Retired and elderly people with time on their hands were another group who were very positive about the yearly opportunity to engage in these creative, expressive activities.

By adhering to expected patterns of exchange, one can try to strategically manipulate the future, but relationships are always contingent. This became clear during discussions with Motomi and Kyoko, two female friends in their early fifties from Osaka. Kyoko, who is single and lives with her elderly mother, admitted that, in recent years, her attitude to the cards had changed, saying: 'It is weird but recently, I stopped sending cards that are only about *giri* [obligation]. You know, I started to think: "why do they keep on arriving, even after I haven't sent one the year before?" When Motomi replied: 'You are right, it is only *giri*', Kyoko continued: 'but one particular year it really killed my heart (*kokoro goroshi*), and I asked myself: "Why did this card arrive yet again?" and then I decided: "I am really sorry, but this is the end of it (*mo sore de gomen nasai*)". This revelation made Motomi confess that she, too, had reached a point where she 'really couldn't be bothered any more'; that she actually no longer checked who had reciprocated and just posted her card to the same list every year. Nishiki-san, a mother of two in her fifties, similarly continued to send cards to all her contacts even if someone did not send a card in a particular year, because she thought that her relationships were 'already fixed'. Such strategies may, of course, explain why Kyoko kept on receiving cards after she stopped reciprocating. However, she also thought that people might not 'get the message' because they think: 'I must have forgotten to send one myself ... and then post a card anyway'.

There has been a slight year-on-year decline in the number of cards that circulate, but many people have reconciled themselves to the idea that 'it is too difficult to cut [the relationship] ... it will just continue for ever'. Miyako-san was the only participant who, at a relatively young age, attempted to proactively end her participation by sending the mouse card with which I started this article. It is common for stacks to contain similar cards from senders in their eighties and nineties with the message: 'This is my final year (*Mô oshimai desu*)'. These kinds of cards are considered an acceptable way for elderly people to reduce their engagement in exchange networks. A more subtle approach was taken by 90-year-old Harai-san, a retired civil servant, who used to invest time and effort creating cards decorated with photographs of flowers from his garden. In recent years, he switched to standardized cards sold in the post office, and when another participant, Kema-san, noticed his card in her stack from 2010, she sighed: 'He doesn't even write a personal message any more'. Finally, when someone dies, those living under the same roof will, in late November, send a 'mourning card' (*mochû hagaki*) to let all their network know that they are unable to exchange greetings that year.¹³ Through their temporary social abstinence, relatives of the deceased avoid spreading any potential bad luck, while they can also revitalize their networks of interpersonal and inter-entity relationships in the following year.

The discussion above reveals how the exchange of New Year cards is entangled in the life cycle from birth to death and their temporal reach extends across generations. A final temporal dimension of the cards that I would like to highlight is their built-in obsolescence linked with the zodiac motifs that envelop them. In January, as individual cards are shared around and they imbue homes with luck, their potency is the strongest,



A mourning card Yuko Takahashi sent to me in November 2021, the year that her 88-year-old maternal grandfather and her 89-year-old paternal grandmother passed away. In blue ink, Yuko, then 30 years old, single and living at home, wrote the following *hitokoto*: 'You must be tired after the opening of your exhibition? From 14 January I am going to Paris for seven days. I will email you soon'.

but over time, vibrant stacks slowly turn into depleted heaps. At the end of the year, before the cards are replaced with a new, effective source of luck and sociality, participants will go through them a final time. The focus is on numbers and abstract information printed on the back of the cards and the stack operates like a database that helps people to identify how many cards they need to send/return, while also checking the most up-to-date addresses. Participants generally held on to old stacks as back-ups for one or two years. Before they are eventually disposed of, the qualities of individual cards are assessed a final time. Favourites are removed for safekeeping. Some cards may be kept in special folders, and others just linger in the back of drawers and storage boxes.¹⁴

Conclusion: Multi-scalar networks back to front

In this article, I have argued that, similar to Riles's Fijian documents, Japanese New Year cards are two-dimensional aesthetic devices that bring into view multiple relations that are distributed in space and time. Whereas Riles focuses on the inside-out relationality of informational forms, the paper artefacts I have studied measure and maintain networks through a front-back dynamic. The title of this article is a loose translation of the Japanese proverb '*ichimae no kami ni mo ura-omote*', literally 'even a piece

of paper has a back and a front'. *Ura-omote* (back-front) is a much-cited twinned Japanese concept. The front is associated with exteriority and the public realm, while the back relates to interiority and intimate thoughts and feelings. New Year cards are good to think with because they reverse the back-front trope by equating the front with interiority and the back with normativity. Back-front is often paired with other sets, such as inside-outside (*uchi-soto*) or sincere-superficial (*hone-tatemae*), which are employed to differentiate between heartfelt expressions of self and adherence to social norms. However, these are ideal oppositional sets and, in practice, in Japan, like elsewhere, relations are always contingent. Obligation and harmony are constantly challenged by freedom and friendship. My research over the past two decades indicates that by belonging to a series of in- and out-groups throughout one's life, Japanese people nurture and experiment with multiple notions of self and public expectations of social harmony. A general awareness that the freedom to act does not necessarily alleviate anxiety about one's destiny concurs with trust in larger external forces, whether the regenerative energy in the cosmos, the generosity of the benevolent state, or the ambiance of togetherness (Daniels 2010; 2012; 2015).

Riles argues that the form and design of informational artefacts can produce powerful emotive and political effects. This article corroborates her findings because the surfaces of New Year cards are imbued with a spiritual and social force that generates an all-encompassing, intimate connectedness that reconstitutes individuals as part of the whole and may reduce anxiety about the future. Swift has made a compelling case for a Japanese model of cosmology that is 'constituted at the cosmetic level [and] arranged along surfaces' (2010: 6-10). He singles out paper to show how in Euro-American thinking its thinness and ephemerality are considered superficial, while in Japan they can index the presence of the divine (2010: 6). The paper forms I study are enmeshed in a multi-scalar cosmology that is sustained by an efficient commercial infrastructure of circulation that delivers New Year cards to every corner of the archipelago on the same day and facilitates the yearly renewal of society and the (imagined) community of the nation-state. My ethnography thereby not only challenges any separation between ritual and economic practices, but also suggests that cosmological realities may actually shape economic and political life (Empson 2014).

This said, Riles's network has been critiqued for being seemingly sealed off from the Fijian political economy. My research addresses this issue by expanding her theory across multiple spatial and temporal dimensions. Japanese New Year cards are experienced across a range of scales, linking domestic and local life with national institutions and larger political, economic, and spiritual concerns. The cards are also 'scale-making': they form part of a nation-making project that interweaves the national with the personal and the cosmological. Other anthropologists have, similarly, shown that bureaucratic artefacts such as the passport form produce inter-scalar relations (see, e.g., Hull 2012). These discussions about scale tend to focus on relations of (bureaucratic) production, and in the case of passports, for example, they also scale up to the international and global level. By contrast, my ethnography links national scale-making practices with domestic consumption, coupling the scale of the home and the body with the political, economic, and cosmological. Homes are sites where production and social reproduction converge and where powerful ordering forces and ideologies are challenged by changing ideas about kinship, gender, and patron-client relations.



Sixty-two-year-old Kemasan's New Year card for 2022. Her *hitokoto* (in blue ink) reads: 'Inge-san, for my card this year, I have tried to draw the vegetables that I put in the simmered dishes I prepared for the New Year. I did my best to turn a rough sketch of the real vegetables into a painting, but I did not do a very good job. I will try my best again next year. Please treat me well this year too'.

The back-and-forth aesthetic of New Year cards and the creative tension between quantification and abstraction and qualification and personalization are entangled with multiple temporalities. Their production and circulation instigate concrete temporal experiences, such as the time invested in creating (personalized or standard) visuals and texts, the rush to post the cards in time, or the pressure to deliver billions of cards on the first day of the year. The cards, often inscribed with depictions of prescriptive life-cycle events, punctuate significant moments in people's changing lives from birth to death. Through numerous associations with zodiac animals and other lucky symbols, they reference cyclical, cosmic time. I have shown that the reproduction of patterns and sequences may be a source of both comfort and frustration. The two-dimensional aesthetics of the cards can make people physically experience the rhythmic unfolding of time. Each individual card temporarily foregrounds some (aspects of) relations, while others shift to the back, and this back-front movement references and generates 'not linear time but tidal time' (Mol & Law 2002: 12-13). Over the course of one year, time expands and contracts. In January, the social and spiritual potency of individual cards connects multiple temporalities, spatial scales, and stories that open up people's imaginations. By contrast, when cards are contained in stacks, their expansive, relational powers diminish and time contracts.

Finally, in this article, I have sought to make the case that New Year cards are non-numerical, non-digital forms of data to reimagine not only what data is, but also what it can be. My findings challenge any quantity-quality divide. The numbers of cards and

sizes of stacks quantify the recipients' social success and national belonging. Quantities of relationships and lottery numbers (printed on the back side) increase the chances of winning a share of the symbolic wealth of the nation in the *otoshidama* lottery. Masses of zodiac motifs offer better protection against bad luck in the coming year. Through the personalization of images and texts, senders can deepen particular relationships. However, feelings of togetherness only really thrive if kin and friendship relations are also quantified by the correct form, national etiquette, and spiritual patterns. Overall, my Japanese example substantiates that 'we have always been quantified' (Neff & Nafus 2016: 15). Quantification practices everywhere and throughout time are interwoven with a multiplicity of qualities, such as size, colour, and rhythm. Sensory experiences and the impact of multiple external forces, including luck, matter too. What does this tell us about digital data? Although digital cards have accelerated the scale and immediacy of the yearly ritual of exchange, they have not (yet?) been successful in duplicating the complex, multi-sensory mediations that the paper artefacts afford, from the weight of cards damaging mailboxes to the disassembling and reassembling of stacks embodying the rhythmic unfolding of time. My ethnography thus exposes some of the limitations of digital technologies that may have become ubiquitous in our everyday lives, but that generally lack understanding of context and temporality. This research also accentuates the importance of recognizing the ambiguity and imprecision of data, which always leaves open possibilities for performativity and transgression. Last, although all data is transformative, aesthetic forms relocate knowledge outwards. Digital data tends to aggregate from the level of the individual and risks concealing the multitude of heterogeneous, collective relations inherent in its generation and reproduction.

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NOTES

¹ This area, called the Kansai region, is home to 22 million people, or 20 per cent of the Japanese population. I lived, worked, and studied in the region for seven years from the mid-1990s. To date, I have carried out two other long-term ethnographies there. I started my exploration into New Year cards in 2009 and, over the next ten years, I embarked on multiple research visits that culminated in ten months of fieldwork. Initially, I studied ten participants, but over time this has grown to thirty people, who all considered themselves as belonging to the mainstream middle class.

² Like elsewhere, ongoing digitalization in the past two decades has reduced the presence of handwritten texts in people's everyday lives. However, many participants praised penmanship, which is still taught in schools, both in language classes through the repetition of the correct order of strokes and in art classes through the production of original calligraphy (Adal 2009).

³ Those driven by *kokoro* can become obsessed with self-expression, such as artists who are immersed in their work. The moral superiority of *kokoro* can also draw people into dangerous spiritualism, such as when the population was mobilized during the Second World War (Lebra 1992: 113).

⁴ In 2011, first-prize winners could select (1) a wide-screen Sharp TV; (2) a trip organized by the travel agency JTB; (3) a selection of office goods; (4) a Toshiba computer, a Fuji Film digital camera, a Canon Inkjet printer; and (5) a Sanyo electric bicycle.

⁵ By spending an extra 3 yen (2 pence), senders can also purchase 'otoshidama stamps', which are the same stamps but with an additional strip that contains a lottery number.

⁶ New Year cards were first sent during the 1870s, with the development of the new nationwide postal system.

⁷ Stevens has, similarly, linked the persistence of paper business cards in Japan with the role that the 'touch of paper' plays in the successful embodied enactment of this ritual of exchange (2011: 8). Gould, Kohn, and Gibbs's study of the digitalization of domestic Buddhist altars also demonstrates a continued preference for analogue, multi-sensory encounters with deceased loved ones (2019: 464).

⁸ The Japanese officially adopted the Western calendar (*shinreki*) in 1872, but the lunar calendar (*kyūreki*) continues to be consulted for ritual events.

⁹ Reader (2012) has argued that ongoing secularization in the postwar period has resulted in Buddhism being in a state of inevitable decline. However, others point to its long history of adaptability and vitality in the face of societal change (Nelson 2013; Rowe 2011), while some hold that the narrative of decline has been successfully used to guarantee its long-term survival (Thomas 2015).

¹⁰ To save resources during the Second World War, the 1 January guarantee was suspended from 1940 until 1949.

¹¹ The cards may also be called examples of 'banal nationalism', defined by Billig (1995) as everyday, taken-for-granted forms of national belonging. Although Billig's original thesis challenges the ideology of nationalism and the dynamics of exclusion that it reproduces, it is problematic that the term has come to stand for a bottom-up approach to national identity that is benign and co-produced by citizens (Duchesne 2018: 842-3).

¹² Searle-Chatterjee, similarly, calls British Christmas cards the 'measure of minimal sociality' (1993: 177).

¹³ In February, a second card is sent to those who still send a New Year card to apologize for not sending any cards in return.

¹⁴ Many donated their old stacks to me for further analysis.

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« Même une feuille de papier a deux faces » : cosmologies multiscalaires des cartes de Nouvel An japonaises

Résumé

Chaque année, le 1^{er} janvier, l'efficace service postal japonais distribue simultanément 2,5 milliards de cartes de vœux à tous les foyers du pays. Sur la base d'un travail de terrain ethnographique dans les environs d'Osaka, l'autrice se penche sur la popularité de cet échange sur papier, qui ne se dément pas même à l'âge des smartphones et de l'Internet à haut débit. Dans la lignée de récentes études anthropologiques sur les données numériques, elle avance que ces cartes, banales en apparence, ont un pouvoir de transformation. Elles participent activement, et puissamment, à l'entretien, à l'accroissement et au soin constant de multiples réseaux de relations sociales, économiques et spirituelles. Par l'analyse des qualités matérielles et esthétiques des cartes, l'autrice montre comment leur conception recto-verso matérialise des dimensions des relations entre les Japonais, qui coexistent sans se confondre, sur un axe de qualification à quantification et de personnalisation à standardisation. Ces cartes produisent aussi profondeur et mise à l'échelle en liant des questions intimes et domestiques à des intérêts politiques et économiques plus vastes, tout en entremêlant de multiples dimensions temporelles. En définitive, elles sont un exemple de la manière dont la manipulation de surfaces peut avoir de profondes conséquences cosmologiques. Elles possèdent une puissance spirituelle et sociale qui crée une proximité à la fois intime et universelle, rajeunissant chaque année la société en remplaçant les individus dans le « tout » dont ils font partie.

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