

The Analysis of Nengajō (Japanese New Year's Greeting Card)

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Abstract: The act of giving and receiving New Year's greeting cards in Japan was born out of the traditional practice of visiting family and friends on New Year's Day to exchange greetings. These cards are usually sent to colleagues, friends, and relatives; generally, anyone who has looked out for one during the year, as a form of appreciation. It can either be designed from scratch or chosen from a broad range of pre-printed designs. The card usually depicts some familiar imagery such as Mount Fuji or blooming cherry blossom branches. It also included the zodiac animal of the year. These elements or signs are then examined based on a semiotic theory, breaking it down to a signifier and signified which will then be categorized to the Denotative and Connotative sign system. The goal is to better understand the cultural meaning and symbolism in *nengajō*.

Keywords: greeting card, Japanese, tradition, new year, Roland Barthes

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

New Year is one of the most significant holidays in the entire world, and Japan is no exception. There is a certain custom that has been long established called 年始周り *nenshi-mawari* or New Year's visits, during which families would call on friends, family, neighbours, and those who had aided or shown compassion to them in the previous year to express their gratitude in the goal of maintaining their good relations in the next year; and the way they are showing it is through giving a 年賀状 *nengajō* or New Year's greeting card. These cards can be personally made or be bought from the post office, convenience stores, and stationery store. Most popular *nengajō* designs would often features *eto*, or new year's zodiac animal, traditional Japanese motifs like Mount Fuji or cherry blossoms, and popular characters such as Hello Kitty and Mickey Mouse. The Japanese postal service also holds a lottery, with each of its specially made cards bearing a number. The lucky numbers will then be announced via newspapers, with prizes ranging from money to travel tickets, TV sets, and personal computers. Another important consideration when selecting the recipients is to avoid sending one to a family who is in mourning, especially if the deceased person just passed away recently. The family of the deceased would send a 喪中はがき *mochū hagaki* or a mourning postcard to inform us that they are currently unable to send or receive greeting cards. The post office begins accepting *nengajō* in early December and will make sure to send them precisely by the morning of January 1st.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

In the article titled “Aspek Keutuhan dalam Struktur Estetika pada Kartu Ucapan Tahun Baru Jepang” by Tri Mulyani Wahyuningsih and Budi Santoso (2018) suggests that the signs used in a *nengajō* has an aspect of integrity and harmony between the images and sentences utilized in one card, implying that those signs were picked for more than just aesthetic reasons. A card is considered whole when there is a blend of balance (through the clever arrangement of images in a space) and contrast (through the usage of colour and font sizes in a verbal signs, in the form of text).

RESEARCH METHOD

The method used in this thesis paper is a qualitative method based on Roland Barthes' semiotic theory. Said theory is then represented in the form of a chart below:

Signifier	Signified
Denotative sign (<i>real meaning</i>)	
Signifier	Signified
Connotative sign (<i>myth</i>)	

Figure 1. Chart of Roland Barthes' semiotic theory

[Source: Roland Barthes Semiotics, 2006]

Said chart are used to analyze the data obtained from the websites J:COM (<https://cc-www2.myjcom.jp/special/nenga/lineup.php?cat=2&p=1&n=12>). These extracted data are examined and charted with each sign going through a minimum of two stages of analysis and divided into separate columns based on whether it is a signifier or a signified. They are then further classified into one of Roland Barthes ideal signs: either a denotative sign or a connotative sign.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Dissecting The Card: Year of The Tiger (2022)

This particular card is a greeting card for the Year of the Tiger. It includes an image of tiger, plum blossoms, bamboo leaves, and a backdrop of blue with white clouds. Also included were texts that wishes for a better upcoming year.








Figure 2. Picture of the 2022 greeting card

[Source: <https://cc-www2.myjcom.jp/special/nenga/lineup.php?cat=2&p=1&n=12>]

Said greeting cards are composed of elements of signs that are then broken down into signifiers and signified, further categorized to the Denotative and Connotative sign system. The signs in this greeting card can be explained as below:

Table 1. Components of the visual signs

Elements	Denotative sign	Connotative sign
	A feline animal named tiger	The next year (2022) is going to be the Year of the Tiger
	An image of plum blossoms	The incoming year also coincides with the arrival of spring, or the changing of the season
	An image of bamboo leaves	A hope for luck, wealth, and strength

	An image of white clouds	One bright and sunny day
	Blue backdrop	Clear weather, hoping for a bright future

From the table above, we may deduce that this greeting card consists of 5 visual signs; tiger, red plum blossoms, bamboo leaves, blue background, and white clouds. The following sections will explain each and every visual sign in greater detail.

1. Tiger


	Tiger	
An image of a feline animal called tiger		Year of the Tiger
Denotative sign		
The upcoming year will be the Year of the Tiger		
Connotative sign		

Figure 3. Breaking down the first visual sign: the tiger

The initial analysis of this image denotes that the tiger image becomes the signifier and tiger the animal becomes the signified. The denotative meaning that emerges from the signifier is a drawing of a tiger.

The tiger image then becomes a signifier to symbolize the name of the zodiac year, specifically the year of the Tiger, in the second step of analysis. Japanese society, like Chinese society, recognizes that there are 12 animal zodiacs to name a year and will change zodiacs every year for 12 years. After 12 years, the year of the tiger will reappear. Based on that, the Connotative meaning that can be taken from that is that the upcoming year will be the year of the tiger.

2. Red Plum Blossom

This visual sign is an image of red plum blossoms which is the signifier to its signified, the plum flower itself.



	Plum blossoms	
An image of a bright red plum blossoms	Denotative sign	Spring season
Spring season will come with lots of cheerful energy	Connotative sign 1	The changing of the year
Wishing that the new year—the arrival of spring—would be filled with joy		
Connotative sign 2		

Figure 4. Breaking down the second visual sign: red plum blossoms

Initial analysis of the plum blossoms establishes that the image became the signifier for the plum blossoms, with the denotative meaning of an image of plum blossoms. It was after the second stage of analysis that the bright red plum blossoms became the signifier for the spring season, as they usually bloom around that time. Since the colour bright red is associated with cheerfulness, thus, the connotative interpretation refers to wishing the arrival of spring would be filled with delight. The blooming of the plum blossoms symbolizes the end of a long winter and the coming of spring, marking the changing of the season and year simultaneously, as can be seen from the third analysis. A start of a cheerful spring becomes a mark of the beginning of a new year, and as a result, the connotative definition is the hope that the new year will be filled with joy.

3. Bamboo Leaves

An image of bamboo leaves, which is the signifier for bamboo, is the next visual sign. The whole tree will be represented by the leaves of a bamboo plant. Bamboo is a plant that symbolizes a few things, the most common one being luck or good fortune in the new year in Japanese culture.

	Bamboo leaves	
An image of bamboo leaves	Denotative sign	Symbolizing luck, wealth, and strength

Hoping for good fortune, riches, and resilience in the coming year
Connotative sign

Figure 5. Breaking down the third visual sign: bamboo leaves

The first analysis' signifier for the actual bamboo leaves was, as the chart indicates, the image of bamboo leaves. In the second stage of analysis, the bamboo leaves represent strength, luck, and wealth. It was believed that in Japan, bamboo—which also stands for flexibility and strength—became a symbol of prosperity thanks to its robust root system. They were highly regarded as a sign of fortune and play a significant role in New Year's festivities in Japan. This same bamboo defines rising again after facing difficult challenges; as this is evident in the winter, when thick snow bends the bamboo as low as it may go, but by the spring, the bamboo may stand straight once more. As a result, the third stage's connotative meaning is the desire for luck, prosperity, and strength this year.

4. White Clouds

The next visual sign will be an image of white clouds to signify a white cloud. That image of clouds will then be used to depict a bright and sunny day.


	White clouds	
A picture of white clouds		A good day
Denotative sign		
Wishing for a year that would be filled with plenty of fine days		
Connotative sign		

Figure 6. Breaking down the fourth visual sign: white clouds

In the early stage of the analysis, this image of white clouds will serve as a signifier for actual white clouds (signified). This picture of white clouds, will be the denotative meaning that can be drawn from it. However, the second step of analysis adds more to that idea; that image is a sign of a pleasant day because a good day could be identified by the lack of a gloomy, dark cloud. The connotative meaning of the visual sign of a white cloud image is the hope that this year will be filled with sunny days because the image of a white cloud represents a sunny day.

5. Bright Blue Sky

The last visual sign is a blue background to represent a blue sky. That same blue background will be used to symbolize a bright and clear weather.


	Blue sky	
A picture of a blue background		Bright and clear weather
Denotative sign		
Hope for plenty of sunny weather throughout the upcoming year		
Connotative sign		

Figure 7. Breaking down the fifth visual sign: blue background

The blue background visual sign is determined to be a signifier for a clear blue sky in the first stage of analysis, making it a denotative sign that represents an image of a blue background. Afterwards, the background colour of blue became the signifier and the weather condition became the signified. The absence of stormy clouds and a clear sky are typical indicators of pleasant weather. Because the blue background symbolizes sunny weather, the connotative meaning of that is the wish that this year will be filled with pleasant weather. Both the visual cues of a blue background and white clouds indicate a fine weather or day, since generally a clear day is characterized by a blue sky and white clouds. Furthermore, there is hope for a brighter future in addition to good weather or day. In this instance, the white clouds and blue background can be read as a wish for a bright future for all of us in the next year. Overall, the design of this new year's greeting card expresses the wish that the recipient will experience happiness, prosperity, strength, luck, and a bright future in this year of the tiger.

The *nengajō* in this data also includes verbal signs in the form of writing in addition to visual signs as the following:

Table 2. Components of the verbal signs

Verbal sign	Denotative sign	Connotative sign
新春のお慶び申し上げます Happy New Year	One of the most common formal greeting to wish the recipient a happy new year	
旧年中はお世話になり誠にありがとうございました。 Thank you for your help in the past year	Expressing gratitude to the recipient for their assistance in the previous year	

本年もどうぞよろし

くお願い申し上げます。

I look forward to

working with you again

this year

Wishing for their continued
collaboration this year

The sender's wish to maintain
their support and still willing to
help this year

令和四年 元日

Reiwa 4

New Year's day

Providing information that this
card is delivered to welcome the
year of Reiwa 4

There are 4 expressions that make up the verbal cues found in this *nengajō* which are:

1. 新春のお慶び申し上げます (*Shinshun no oyorokobi mōshiagemasu*) meaning “Happy New Year”,
2. 旧年中はお世話になり誠にありがとうございました (*Kyūnenjū wa osewa ni nari makotoni arigatōgozaimashita*) meaning “thank you for your help in the past year”,
3. 本年もどうぞよろしくお願い申し上げます (*Hon'nen mo dōzo yoroshiku onegai mōshiagemasu*) meaning “we look forward to working with you again this year”, and
4. 令和四年 元日 (*Reiwa yonen, Ganjitsu*) meaning “Year of Reiwa 4, New Year's day”.

More detailed explanation for the denotative and connotative meaning from these verbal signs can be explained as below:

新春のお慶び申し上げます “Happy New Year”	A Happy New Year's greeting.
This greeting is used to wish a happy new year to the recipient of this card.	
Denotative sign	

Figure 8. Breaking down the first verbal sign

The verbal sign above is quite a common phrase to wish someone a happy new year, so it became the signifier to the phrase happy new year. The message "Happy New Year" is delivered firmly and straightforwardly, making the verbal sign's denotative meaning obvious.

旧年中はお世話になり誠にありがとうございました。 “Thank you for your help in the past year.”	An expression of gratitude.
This phrase is used to thank the recipient for their assistance in the previous year.	
Denotative sign	

Figure 9. Breaking down the second verbal sign

The following verbal sign can be translated to “thank you for your help in the past year” and serves as a signifier to the signified, an expression of gratitude. Said phrase is also communicated clearly so the denotative meaning is quite apparent; they are used to thank the recipient of this particular *nengajō*.

本年もどうぞよろしくお願ひ申し上げます。 “I look forward to working with you again this year.”	A desire to keep working together.
Wishing for their continued collaboration in the upcoming year.	A wish for ongoing support.
Denotative sign	
The sender’s wish to maintain their support and still willing to help in the next year.	
Connotative sign	

Figure 10. Breaking down the third verbal sign

Unlike the previous verbal signs that only have a denotative sign, this particular phrase has both denotative and connotative meaning. In the first step of analysis, the term 本年もどうぞよろしくお願ひ申し上げます *Hon'nen mo dōzo yoroshiku onegai mōshiagemasu* “I look forward to working with you again this year” became the signifier for a desire to keep working together (signified). The denotative meaning that can be concluded from that message is the *nengajō* sender’s wish for their continued collaboration in the upcoming year.

In the second analysis stage, the phrase takes on the meaning of wishing for continued assistance. This sentence conveys a desire to collaborate as well as the expectation that the card's sender will continue to receive support in many shape or form, and this is understandable if we consider the earlier verbal expression of gratitude for assistance. Furthermore, it can be inferred that the verbal sign that follows expresses the sender's wish for the recipient of the greeting card to continue offering aid this year.

令和四年 元日 “Reiwa 4 New Year’s day”	The name of the year (Reiwa 4)
To date the new year’s card	Informing the name of the year
Denotative sign	

Giving the information that this new year is the year of Reiwa 4

Connotative sign

Figure 11. Breaking down the fourth verbal sign

Last but not least, this verbal sign provided details regarding the celebration of the new year. The term 令和四年 元旦 *Reiwa Yonen Ganjitsu* which translates to “Reiwa 4, New Year’s day” became the signifier for the name of the year: Reiwa 4. The sentence above informs the recipients of the card that this *nengajō* is given to welcome the year of Reiwa 4, which is the denotative meaning contained in it.

CONCLUSION

It is evident from the analysis' results that a *nengajō* is created using both verbal and visual signs. The visual signs that shapes a *nengajō* takes the form of a tiger to represent the year's name, red plum blossoms to represent the year's change and a cheerful mood, three sets of bamboo leaves to represent luck, strength, and prosperity, and a blue and white background to represent a promising future. This hope is then reinforced using the verbal sign 本年もどうぞよろしく願い申し上げます *Hon'nen mo dōzo yoroshiku onegai mōshiagemasu* which implies they have worked together in the past and is a request from the sender of this *nengajō* to the recipient to continue their partnership. The process of interpreting a visual sign involved two steps: figuring out the denotative (actual) meaning in the first step and the connotative (mythical) meaning in the second. The cultural values and traditions of Japan constitutes the connotative sign.

The verbal sign, on the other hand, consists of written expressions of a New Year's greeting, words of appreciation, wishes for continued cooperation, and information about the year's name. Both denotative and connotative meaning of these signs was determined through two stages of analysis and interpretation, but the second stage is not necessary if the meaning is already obvious and understandable. If the verbal sign has a meaning other than the literal meaning contained in the phrase, it is necessary to perform the second stage of interpretation in order to determine the connotative meaning. Combining the meaning of the verbal and visual sign is crucial to reveal the true meaning or message that a *nengajō* is meant to communicate.

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