

Recitation E

## The Year of the Fire Horse

The legend of the Fire Horse is one of the most famous folk stories in Japan. It began in the late 17th century with the story of Yaoya Oshichi. She was a young woman born in a Fire Horse year and was accused of causing a large fire in Edo. Because of this story, people came to believe that girls born in a Fire Horse year had very strong and stubborn personalities. It was said that they were so strong-minded that they could bring trouble to their families.

These beliefs became deeply rooted in Japanese culture and even influenced the country's history. In Fire Horse years such as 1846, 1906, and 1966, Japan's birth rate dropped greatly. Many couples avoided having children because they feared social pressure. In particular, in 1966, the number of births fell by about 21 to 24 percent. Today, however, modern parents are less likely to believe these old ideas than people in the past.

In Japan's Shinto religion, horses have long been respected as special animals. They were believed to connect humans and gods and were called *Shinme*, meaning "horses of the Gods." White horses are especially important because they symbolize purity and are often connected to the Sun Goddess, Amaterasu.

In Japan, horses are also linked to order and honor because of their connection to the samurai. For this reason, horses are often shown with beautiful bridles and saddles. These decorations represent discipline and a close relationship between horses and humans.

In the Japanese language, horses are also symbols of good luck and success. The word for horse, *uma*, when read backward, becomes *mau*, which means "to dance." This wordplay created *Hidari Uma*, or the left-facing horse symbol. It is often used as a charm to bring prosperity and good fortune to homes and businesses.

(301 words)