

Book Review

Haruo Shirane. *Japan and the Culture of the Four Seasons: Nature, Literature, and the Arts*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012. 311 pp. (ISBN 9780231152808)

Haruo Shirane's *Japan and the Culture of the Four Seasons* is a work of impressive scope, tracing the development of seasonal thematics and motifs over 1,000 years of Japanese history. Starting with the codification of natural and seasonal topics in the imperial *waka* anthologies of the Heian period (794-1185), Shirane shows how the dominant courtly *waka* tradition interacted with other forms of art and culture throughout early Japanese history, eventually diffusing more widely to the general populace in the Edo period. Compiling research on a wide range of artistic and cultural forms throughout Japan's premodern period, Dr. Shirane convincingly demonstrates the pervasive influence the courtly poetic tradition had in establishing the culture of the four seasons.

Shirane takes on the myth "that the Japanese have an inherent affinity with nature and that this affinity is one of the major characteristics of Japanese culture" (5). He argues that this tradition of harmony with nature is not something inherent to the Japanese people, but an historical construction related to the development of what he calls secondary nature. Shirane uses the term secondary nature (*nijiteki shizen*) to refer to the elegant representation of nature as a surrogate for a more primary nature cultivated in capital-centered *waka* and other genres as a means of social communication among educated urban elites.

Shirane's study is arranged chronologically, beginning with the emergence of seasonal topics in the *Man'yōshū* (*Collection of Ten*

Thousand Leaves, ca. 759) in poetry dating from the seventh and eighth centuries. At this early point, the influence of Chinese poetry helped to establish some of the key features of later *waka*: the use of natural landscapes to express private emotion, the symbolic use of natural motifs (such as the carp climbing a river or waterfall as an auspicious image), and the prominence of trees and other motifs found not in the wild but in the cultivated gardens of the city. In the *Kokinshū* and subsequent imperial *waka* anthologies, seasonal topics were expanded and further codified, developing specific cultural associations. The system of seasonal associations that was established in *waka* during the Heian period became an established cultural vocabulary, and natural motifs were used as the vehicle for expressing oneself in social communication.

In the Muromachi period (1392-1573) *renga* (classical linked verse) became the dominant poetic form, carrying on the *waka* tradition. During this period, seasonal associations were expanded, and even greater precision was demanded in invoking natural imagery. *Renga* manuals, designed to aid the poet in constructing culturally appropriate seasonal associations, divided seasons into three phases (early, middle, and late), and seasonal topics (*kidai*) and seasonal words (*kigo*) came to be associated with specific seasonal phases or months. As the *renga* poet moved through the seasons in a series of linked verses, inspiration was taken not from nature as such but from the foundation of established associations, based on classical precedent, which allowed for mutual understanding between poet and audience.

In the Edo period, *haikai* (popular linked verse) emerged as the most widely pursued poetic genre. Inheriting the *waka* and *renga* traditions and their highly ordered seasonal associations, *haikai* also moved in new directions by breaking classical conventions and bringing themes from everyday life into the mix. *Haikai* popularized the culture of the four seasons by making the formerly elite poetic tradition more accessible to commoners. As the culture of the four

seasons diffused more widely, the possibilities for natural motifs were also widened to include such vulgar topics as flies, fish, and even cat's love (*neko no koi*, a seasonal topic referencing the squealing of mating cats in spring).

While the poetic tradition forms the backbone of Shirane's investigation of secondary nature, the value of this work derives in large part from its extensive inclusion of various forms of visual and performance culture and their role in the culture of the four seasons. Women literally wrapped themselves in the four seasons, from the twelve-layered robes (*jūni hitoe*) of the Heian period to the *kosode* kimono of the Edo period, the designs of which were heavily influenced by seasonal associations derived from the *waka* tradition. Shirane also looks at the interiorization of secondary nature through the arts of the alcove (*tokonoma*), such as flower arranging, painting, calligraphy, and the tea ceremony. And Shirane's investigation is not confined to the city, moving to the countryside to consider the *satoyama* landscape, the farm village located near a river at the base of a mountain, and its depictions in anecdotal literature (*setsuwa*), Muromachi popular tales (*otogi-zōshi*), and other prose genres. Due to the heavy influence of the human hand in this environment, it was likewise a kind of secondary nature, but with none of the elegance of the courtly version; here, nature could be a serious threat, and was inhabited by gods who needed to be appeased in order to avoid their fury, or worshipped to thank them for their benevolence. As capital- and *satoyama*-based secondary nature intersected with increasing frequency, art forms such as *nob* emerged, which relied on *waka*-based associations but often privileged the perspective of plants or animals.

Combining a broad historical perspective, copious literary and visual analyses, and ecocriticism theory, *Japan and the Culture of the Four Seasons* constitutes a significant contribution to diverse fields of Japanese literary and cultural studies. If specific examples for the arguments made are occasionally sparse, given the vast historical period and diverse genres covered, a detailed appendix and

bibliography point the interested reader towards opportunities for more thorough research into the topics covered. In the conclusion Shirane briefly addresses manifestations of the culture of the four seasons in modern Japan, particularly in *haiku* but also in the continued practice of traditional arts such as flower arranging and the tea ceremony. Future research might build upon the assertions made in *Japan and the Culture of the Four Seasons* by looking at the way that modern perspectives and genres have continued to shape the role of nature and the seasons in Japanese culture.

Reviewed by

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