

# Rethinking Nature in Contemporary Japan

## From Tradition to Modernity

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# Japan and the Culture of the Four Seasons

## Nature, Literature and the Arts

Haruo Shirane  
(Columbia University, New York City, USA)

**Abstract** This paper examines the major functions of the representations of nature in traditional Japanese culture with an emphasis on the following: 1) the codification of nature and the seasons in a wide range of Japanese cultural phenomena, beginning with classical poetry (*waka*) and scroll paintings (*emaki*), from at least the tenth century onward; 2) the cause, manner, and function of that codification, particularly the social and religious functions; 3) a major historical change in the representation of nature in the late medieval period (fourteenth to sixteenth centuries) to include more farm-village based views of nature and the seasons; and 4) the dynamic of intertwining courtly and popular representations of nature in the early modern period (seventeenth to nineteenth centuries).

**Summary** 1 Talismanic Representation. – 2 The Function of Seasonal Words. – 3 *Satoyama* (Farm Village at the Foot of a Mountain). – 4 Seasonal Pyramid. – 5 Seasonal Words in the Modern Period.

**Keywords** Nature. Four seasons. Japanese culture. Social and talismanic functions.

This essays aims to deal with the major functions of nature in traditional Japanese culture. The analysis will be drawn from my recent book title *Japan and the Culture of the Four Seasons*.<sup>1</sup>

Let us begin with a large Japanese screen painting (*byōbu-e* 屏風絵) from around the sixteenth century (fig. 1). The painting below has no title, leaving us to guess the content. However, if the viewer knows the iconography, the view will recognise both time and place.

If we look closely at this painting, we will see not only cherry blossoms surrounding a mountain stream. This particular combination signals that this is Yoshino, a mountain (or series of high hills) outside of Nara, which became famous for its cherry blossoms. The flower at the very centre of the painting is a *yamabuki* 山吹 (yellow kerria), sometimes translated into English as ‘mountain rose’, which indicates not only that the scene is spring but that it is late spring.

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



Figure 1. “Blossoming Cherry Trees in Yoshino”. Courtesy of the John Weber Collection

Figure 2 shows another example, from the cover of a black lacquer box, again with no title, owned by the Nezu Museum in Japan.

The combination of the moon, the autumn grasses and deer indicates that the scene is from a famous poem in the *Kokinshū* 古今集 (Collection of Poems Old and New, Autumn no. 214), the first and most influential imperial anthology of classical poetry. As a matter of fact, this particular combination of natural motifs appears in poetry from as early as the Nara period, in the *Man'yōshū* 万葉集 (Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves, edited in the mid-eighth century). The implied poem is:

*Yamazato wa aki koso koto ni wabishikere  
Shika no naku ne ni me o samashitsutsu*

A mountain village,  
ever so lonely in autumn!  
The sound of the crying deer  
keeps awakening me.<sup>2</sup>

The *susuki* 芒 (pampas grass) and *hagi* 萩 (bush clover) are autumn grasses, and the moon suggests loneliness. The combination indicates that the deer

2 All the translations are by the Author.

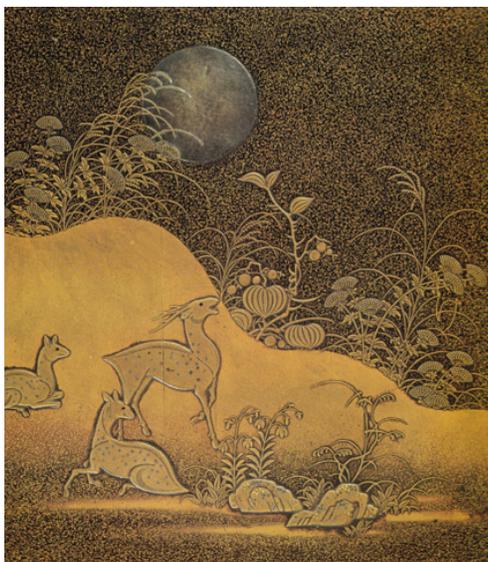


Figure 2. “Deer Under An Autumn Moon”.  
Courtesy of the Nezu Museum



Figure 3. “Autumn Moon in the Mirror Stand”.  
Courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago

is lonely and seeking its female partner. The following eighteenth century *ukiyo-e* 浮世絵 print by Suzuki Harunobu 鈴木春信 shows the interior of a house: the same *susuki* appears in the window, indicating autumn. A young woman is seated in front of a mirror stand in which the mirror takes the shape of an inverted crescent moon, thus evoking the same autumnal combination. This is a witty visual combination that only the connoisseur would catch, but it is indicative of the prevalence of this kind of seasonal codification over the centuries.

Some of the questions that may be raised are: why is the encoding of nature and the seasons so detailed and so extensive in Japan, especially in the pre-modern period? Where did this come from? Why did it occur? In what ways was it manifested? What kinds of functions did the seasonal representations have? And most of all, how did it evolve historically? Since the Meiji period (1868-1912), scholars and critics have provided three basic answers for the prominence of representations of nature in Japanese culture:

1. Mild Climate;
2. Gentle Topography;
3. Agricultural (Rice) country.

These three factors, the argument goes, led to the prominence of nature and seasons in Japanese culture and arts as well as to a sense of harmony between humans and nature. A widely used teacher’s handbook in high

school today describes the “Special Characteristics of Japanese Literature” as follows:

Japan is an agricultural country; the Japanese are an agricultural people. Since agriculture is controlled by the seasons and the climate and since the climate in Japan is warm and mild, Japan is characterized by the leisurely change of the seasons. In contrast to the Westerners who fight with and conquer nature, the Japanese live in harmony with nature and desire to become one with it. The literature that is born from such a climatic conditions (*fūdo*) naturally emphasizes unity with nature.<sup>3</sup>

The truth is that Japan is far from a mild climate; it has a severe monsoon season, with annual flooding, hot summers and hurricanes. This chart shows the environmental reality of Japan’s climate, topography and rice agriculture.

Mild Climate	⇒	Reality: severe monsoon climate, hurricanes, annual flooding, hot and humid summers.
Gentle Topography	⇒	Reality: earthquake zone, volcanic, mountainous terrain, tsunami.
Agricultural Country	⇒	Reality: rice agriculture led to deforestation and the destruction of wild nature.

Instead of gentle topography, Japan is mountainous and volcanic, sitting on a fault zone with frequent earthquakes and tsunamis. The excessive construction of rice fields in mountain terrain led in many cases to the devastation of the natural environment. The building of the massive Tōdai-ji Temple in Nara, in the eighth century, led to deforestation in the Kansai region and, by the seventeenth century, environmental degradation had resulted in a nation-wide phenomenon called *hageyama* 禿山 (bald mountains), in which the hills surrounding rice fields were stripped of vegetation, leading to landslides and infertile soil.

It may be argued that Japan’s ‘harmony with nature’ was largely a cultural construction that occurred in the capital and large cities and that was enforced and deepened by a number of cultural phenomena such as screen paintings and court poetry (31-syllable *waka* 和歌), both of which focused on an aesthetically refined representation of nature and the seasons.

The aesthetic relationship between nature and human emotions is demonstrated in this scene from the famous *Tale of Genji Picture Scrolls* from the twelfth century (fig. 4). The painting, which depicts a scene from the “The Rites” (*Minori*) chapter, shows the hero Genji in grief as he watches his great love, Murasaki, dying. On the left is a garden filled with autumn

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3 Nishihara Kazuo; Tsukakoshi Kazuo; Katō Minoru; Watanabe Yasuaki; Ikeda Takumi (eds.) (2000). *Shinsōgō zusetu kokugo*. Tōkyō: Tōkyō shoseki.

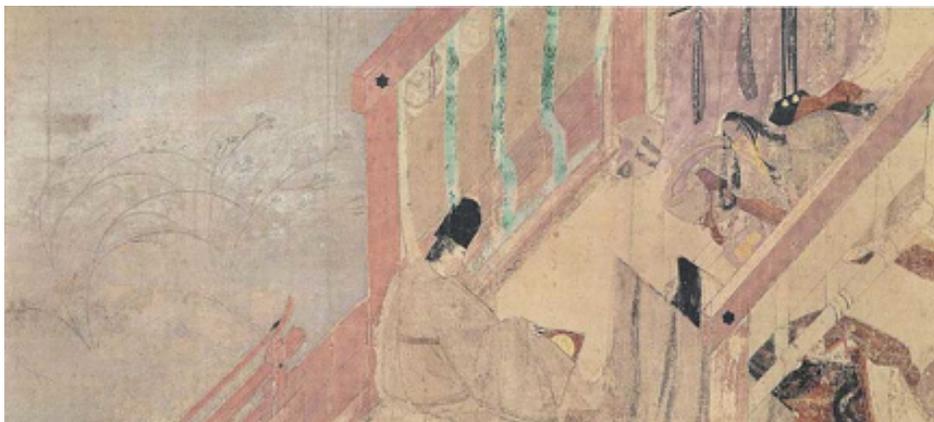


Figure 4. “The Rites”, in *The Tale of Genji Scrolls*. Courtesy of the Gotō Museum

grasses (bush clover and pampas grass), which provide the basis for the poetry exchange between Genji and Murasaki:

*oku to miru hodo zo hakanaki to mo sureba kaze ni midaruru hagi no uwatsuyu*

So briefly rests the dew  
upon the bush clover—  
even now it scatters in the wind.

In this poem Murasaki is talking about her own life, which she compares to the dew on the bush clover, about to be blown away by the wind in the garden. As we can see here, Japanese classical poetry (*waka* 和歌), like the painting itself, depends on natural and seasonal imagery to express deep human emotions.

Another scene, from *The Tale of Genji Scrolls*' "Azumaya" chapter, shows the prevalence of natural imagery within Heian aristocratic residences (fig. 5). If we look carefully, we see that nature is represented not only in the garden (beyond visual sight to the far left) but throughout the interior: on the sliding door, the wall, the hanging curtain and the women's dress. This can be defined as 'secondary nature', that is nature reconstructed in court poetry, painting, architecture, gardens, dress, tea ceremony, flower arrangement, and other visual phenomena, particularly from the Heian period (794-1185).

When did this kind of secondary nature develop? The first systematic representation of nature and the four seasons occurs in the *Man'yōshū* 万葉集 (edited in the eighth century), in Books Eight and Ten, where thirty-one syllable poetry is arranged by seasonal topics in seasonal order. These poems were almost entirely composed in the city and at the residences of



Figure 5. “An Eastern Cottage”, in *The Tale of Genji Scrolls*.  
Courtesy of the Tokugawa Reimeikai Foundation

aristocrats, in the Tenpyō era (729-749), when Japan developed its first major metropolis at Nara. This was not an engagement with primary nature but with reconstructed nature in an urban setting.

The ideal of the four seasons is embodied in the *Kokinshū* 古今集 (Collection of Japanese Poems Old and New, early tenth), which further refined the seasonal arrangement found in Books Eight and Ten of the *Man'yōshū*. Here are some of the major seasonal motifs from the seasonal books of the *Kokinshū*:

- SPRING: plum blossoms, warbler, cherry blossoms, yellow kerria (*yamabuki*), wisteria;
- SUMMER: small cuckoo (*hototogisu*), deutzia (*unohana*);
- AUTUMN: bright foliage, bush clover, pampas grass;
- WINTER: snow, waterfowl.

The seasons, at least as presented in the *Kokinshū*, are understood as having three specific phases, with a strict progression within each season. In spring, we start with plum blossoms, then move to cherry blossoms, before coming to the yellow kerria (*yamabuki*) and the wisteria. The seasonal books of the *Kokinshū* were weighted heavily toward spring and autumn, which had two books each:

Spring poems	<u>134</u>	(two books)
Summer poems	34	(one book)
Autumn poems	<u>145</u>	(two books)
Winter poems	29	(one book)

In reality, Japan had long summers and long winters, with a relatively short spring and autumn. Some climatologists in Japan believe that Japan has five seasons: *tsuyu* 梅雨, the monsoon season, and *tsuyu-ake* 梅雨明け, the post-monsoon season. If you have been to Japan in summer, you know that there are two very different seasons. In other words, summer is very prominent and very long, but in the poetic culture of the *Kokinshū* summer has been reduced to a short, if not inconsequential, season. Secondary nature of this type is not a reflection of nature so much as an ideal. In the *Kokinshū*, poetry about summer is not about hot summer, but about the summer night, which is thought to be the shortest and the coolest time. Likewise, poetry on winter is not about the cold but about the falling snow flakes that look like scattering cherry blossoms; in other words, snow represents a wishful feeling that spring will arrive as quickly as possible.

By the thirteenth century, these seasonal associations had become so codified that Fujiwara Teika 藤原定家 (1162-1241), the most influential *waka* poet of his time, wrote a series of poems in which he matched specific flowers with specific birds for each phase of the season.

First Month	willow	bush warbler ( <i>uguisu</i> )
Second Month	cherry blossoms	pheasant
Third Month	wisteria	skylark ( <i>hibari</i> )
Fourth Month	deutzia flower ( <i>unohana</i> )	small cuckoo ( <i>hototogisu</i> )
Fifth Month	Chinese citron ( <i>rokitsu</i> )	marsh hen ( <i>kuina</i> )
Sixth Month	wild pink ( <i>tokonatsu</i> )	cormorant ( <i>u</i> )
Seventh Month	yellow valerian ( <i>ominaeshi</i> )	magpie ( <i>kasasagi</i> )
Eighth Month	bush clover	first wild geese ( <i>hatsukari</i> )
Ninth Month	pampas grass ( <i>susuki</i> )	quail ( <i>uzura</i> )
Tenth Month	late chrysanthemum	crane ( <i>tsuru</i> )
Eleventh Month	loquat ( <i>biwa</i> )	plover ( <i>chidori</i> ),
Twelfth Month	early plum blossom	waterfowl ( <i>mizutori</i> )

These pairs became the basis for many of the seasonal paintings in subsequent periods. This particular codification appears in court and aristocratic fashion. Heian court robes worn by women had coloured sleeves with the interior and the exterior named after a particular flower. An example is the drawing from the *Sanjū-rokkasen emaki* (Picture Scroll of



Figure 6. Detail from the *Picture Scroll of the Thirty-six Poetic Geniuses*. Courtesy of the Museum Yamato Bunkakan, Nara

the *Thirty-six Poetic Geniuses*; fig. 6) depicts a Heian twelve-layered robe (*Jūni-hitoe* 十二単).

Some of the more prominent sleeve colours are as follows.

Crimson Plum ( <i>kōbai</i> )	white surface, dark red interior	Second Month
Cherry Blossom ( <i>sakura</i> )	white surface, flowered interior	First to Third Month
Yellow Kerria ( <i>yamabuki</i> )	light tan surface, yellow interior	Third Month
Wisteria ( <i>fujī</i> )	light lavender surface, dark green interior	Third and Fourth Months

The yellow of the *yamabuki*, for example, indicated the Third Month, the third phase of the spring. In the *Makura no sōshi* (The Pillow Book, around 995-1004), Sei Shōnagon 清少納言, a court lady, makes fun of those ladies whose sleeve colours failed to match the phase of the season.



Figure 7. Doll's Festival and *ikebana*. Courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

## 1 Talismanic Representation

Let us now turn to another important aspect of the cultural representation of nature: the talismanic function. Here natural images represent things that will last forever or that will bring protection. Prominent examples are the crane, the pine (evergreen), and the rising sun, which appear in poetry, paintings and annual observances (such as New Year's). Talismanic images or objects were very important in the pre-modern period when disease and mortality were constant concerns. As it is probably known, the rising sun became the central image of the modern Japanese national flag.

Festivals (*matsuri* 祭り), to worship or thank gods or buddhas, and annual court observances (*nenjū gyōji* 年中行事) also employed nature for talismanic purposes. Each of the *Gosekku* 五節句 (Five Annual Observances), the most important of the annual observances, was associated with a specific plant, which was thought to bring protection or good fortune.

The *ukiyo-e* print above (fig. 7) is an example of the Doll's Festival (*Hina-matsuri* ひな祭り), one of the *Gosekku*, which is still celebrated today, on the third of the Third Month. The nectar from the peach blossoms (depicted here in the *ikebana* 生け花, or 'flower arrangement') was thought to bring immortality.

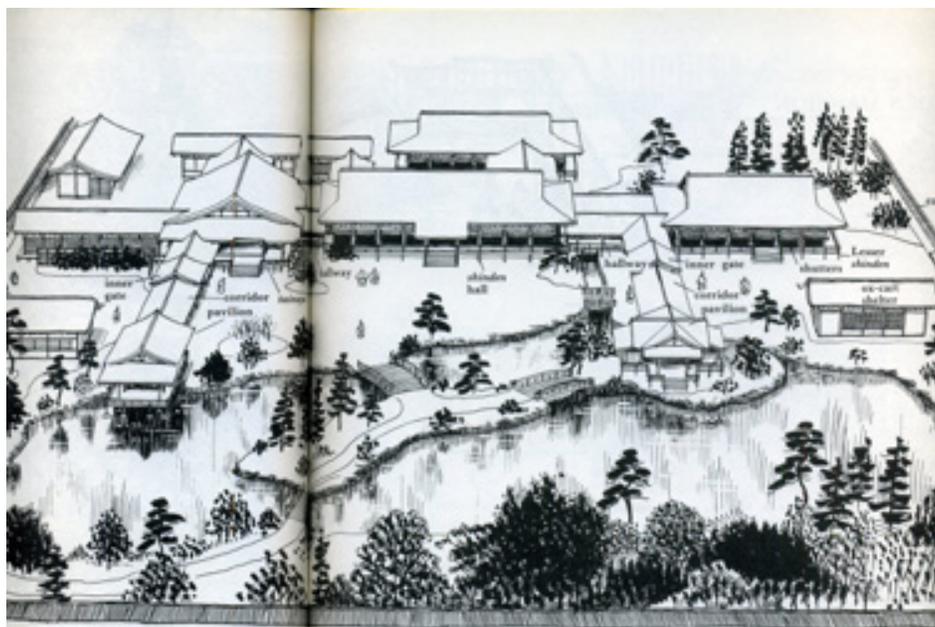


Figure 8. Heian-period 'palace-style' residence. Courtesy of Kazuo Nishi and Kazuo Hozumi



Figure 9. Black lacquer incense container with Mount Hōrai. Courtesy of the Suntory Museum of Art

When nature is represented in traditional Japanese visual arts and poetry, it is necessary to remember that there are two possibilities: 1) it is usually seasonal, often a particular phase of the season; and 2) it could be trans-seasonal, with talismanic functions. A typical example is the chrysanthemum (*kiku* 菊), which usually indicates an autumnal scene in poetry but which can, as a talismanic image, also indicate longevity and good fortune, as in the Japanese Imperial Crest. Another example is the plum blossoms, which marks the beginning of spring in classical Japanese poetry but which can, particularly in a Chinese-style painting, imply endurance. The plum tree blossoms early, while it is still snowing, and is able to endure the snow. It thus became associated with endurance in both the Chinese and Japanese tradition.

Motifs in gardens constructed by the aristocracy in the Nara (710-784) and Heian (794-1185) periods were also talismanic. The design in Figure 8 shows a *shinden-zukuri* 寝殿造り (palace-style) aristocratic residence from the eleventh century.

In the middle of the large garden is a miniature island, called *nakajima* 中島, or 'middle island', which originally represented an island in the sea where the gods (*kami* 神) were thought to descend. If you crossed over to the *nakajima*, it would bring you good luck and long life. The *suhama* 州浜, the sandy beach that surrounds the island and the edge of the pond, was also considered talismanic. The millions pebbles of sand, the endless weaving in and out of coves, where waves from the sea came to land, made it talismanic.

Japanese garden often had a small island referred to as Hōrai (PengLai), which represented the land of the immortals. Figure 9 is an example of Hōrai depicted on the cover of a black lacquer container. The painting contains a cluster of talismanic motifs: pines, cranes and the sandy coves.

In Japanese literature and painting, the protagonist will often come across a garden in which the four seasons appear in four directions, a marker of a timeless utopia. At the height of *The Tale of Genji*, for example, the Shining Genji builds a four-winged, four-season palatial structure for his women called the Rokujō-in. Genji's great love, Murasaki, is housed in the spring quarters, the most important of the four wings.

## 2 The Function of Seasonal Words

Seasonal greetings are an implicit requirement at the beginning of Japanese letters. The opening line usually mentions a particular phase of the season. The seasonal word (*kigo* 季語) was also a requirement for the seventeen-syllable haiku. The function of the *kigo* is demonstrated here in a famous haiku by Matsuo Bashō 松尾芭蕉 (1644-1694):

*shiragiku no me ni tatete miru chiri mo nashi*

gazing intently  
at the white chrysanthemums—  
not a speck of dust.

The poet comes to a house and sees the white chrysanthemum, which may be arranged at the entrance. Here the white chrysanthemum represents his hostess (Sono), who is a female patron and poet. The poem implies that the hostess (and by implication the house) are as pure as the white chrysanthemums. The *kigo* also indicates that the meeting took place in autumn. As we can see here, the *kigo* 季語 or ‘seasonal word’ not only marks time and place; it can show respect to the addressee and serve as a sign of politeness and cultivation.

This kind of social function occurs in a wide range of Japanese arts and media. *Ikebana* 生け花, or ‘flower arrangement’, which emerged in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, is another prominent example. There are two historical roots for *ikebana*: one is the flower as a Buddhist offering, a show of respect to the deceased or to a deity, and the other is the flower attached by Heian aristocrats to classical poems and letters. This scene (*Boki-ekotoba* 簿記絵詞) from a fourteenth century painting scroll depicts a *waka* party in front of a low *tokonoma* 床の間 (alcove) decorated with an image of Hitomaro (namely the god of *waka*). In front of the hanging scroll of Hitomaro are two small flower arrangements.

The flower arrangements can be seen as offerings to the god of Hitomaro; they can also be seen as the beginning of *ikebana* in which nature is reconstructed within the dwelling and served as a greeting to the guests.

The flower arrangement became a complex art. The most sophisticated form was referred to as *rikka* 立花 (standing flower), which had a wide range of social functions. One of the most famous of the *rikka* treatises, the *Sendensho* 仙伝抄 (1445-1536), gives instruction on the type of flower arrangement suitable for specific social occasions. Here are two examples:

Flowers for going off to battle [*shutsujin*]

[...] should not use camellia, maple, azalea [*tsutsuji*], or other plants whose flowers or leaves scatter easily

Flowers for a new dwelling [*watamashi no hana*]

[...] should not include anything that is red, which suggests fire

In the entry for “flowers for going off to battle”, a major social event for warriors, the treatise notes that one should not use camellia, maple leaves, azalea, or plants whose flowers or leaves scatter easily (scattering would be a bad omen). Fires were a constant danger in the pre-modern period because of the

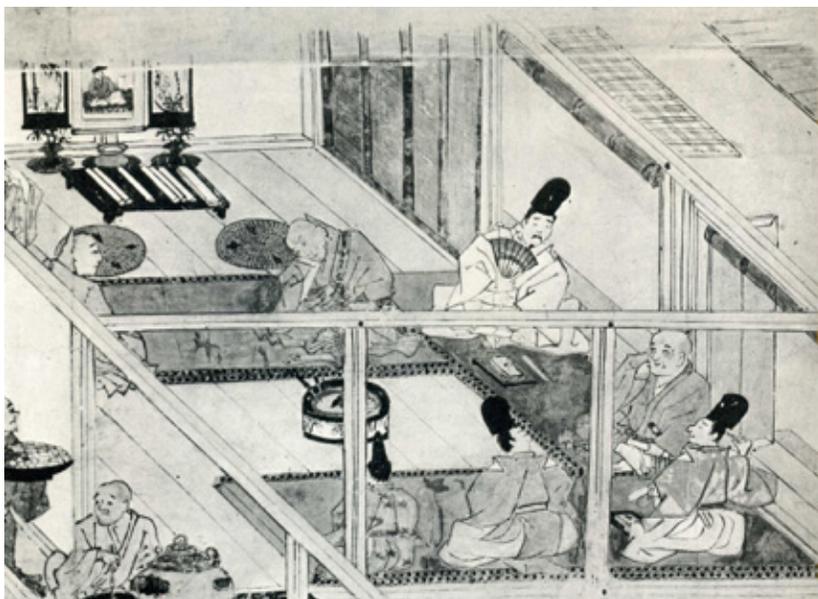


Figure 10. Scene from *Boki-ekotoba*, reprinted in *Zoku Nihon no emaki*, vol. 9, 1990. Courtesy of Chūō kōron sha



Figure 11. *Satoyama*, by Nagai Kazuo, 2007. Courtesy of the artist

wood dwellings. As a consequence, the advice for a new house celebration is that the *ikebana* should not include anything that is red, suggesting fire.

### 3 Satoyama (Farm Village at the Foot of a Mountain)

Now the focus can be shifted on a different kind of cultural construction of nature, outside the city and the court, one that can be referred to as *satoyama* 里山 (literally, village mountain), or ‘the farm village at the foot of the mountain’. Typically the farm village was built near a river and at the foot of the mountains, for irrigation and for fertilizer, which was taken from the underbrush. The following painting is a modern rendition of the *satoyama*.

The *satoyama*, which became the frequent setting for folk tales and popular fiction from the Heian period (794-1185) onward, includes farm animals in the village as well as wild animals in the hills. The following is a more expanded landscape that includes the supernatural and otherworldly creatures that appear in folk tales, popular literature and medieval theatre:

Mountain Peak	wizard ( <i>sennin</i> 仙人), <i>tengu</i> 天狗, heavenly maiden ( <i>tennyo</i> 天女), heavenly swan ( <i>shiratori</i> 白鳥)
Mountain Recess	mountain ogre ( <i>yamanba</i> 山姥), demon ( <i>oni</i> 鬼)
Mountain Foothills	fox, raccoon, monkey, rabbit, boar, snake
Farm Village	dog, cat, chicken, cow, horse, mouse
Rice field	snake, frog, insects

In the village are the domesticated animals (such as dogs, chickens, etc.). Immediately above, in the foothills, are the animals that were hunted, such as foxes, raccoons, monkeys, rabbits, and boars. Significantly rabbits and raccoons do not appear in classical poetry; they were not part of the court culture found in the capital.

This new *satoyama* cosmology becomes increasingly prominent in the late medieval period. The result was two distinct cultures: a court culture developed from the ancient period in the capital and a rural and popular culture found in the provincial villages. The following chart shows some of the differences in their representation of nature.

PLANTS	
COURT-BASED	SATOYAMA-BASED
herry, plum,	red pine
willow, <i>ominaeshi</i>	<i>susuki</i> (pampas grass)
yellow kerria ( <i>yamabuki</i> )	chestnuts, barley
ANIMALS	
bush warbler	sparrow, swallow
deer	wild boar, raccoon
cicada	fly, mosquito

The courtly images of nature, which emerged from as early as the sixth and seventh centuries, are on the left: the cherry blossoms, plum blossoms, *yamabuki* (yellow kerria), and so forth. On the right are the plants and animals that appeared in farm villages and in the popular literature. Sparrow and swallow, for example, do not appear in the court poetry, but they became a very important part of folk literature (*setsuwa* 説話) and Muromachi tales (*otogizōshi* 御伽草子) in the medieval period. In the court-based nature, the emphasis is on colour and scent and on beautiful, harmonious sounds. In farm village-based culture, by contrast, nature is regarded as bounty (harvest) and the source of disaster or pests.

Interestingly, by the late medieval period, from about the fourteenth or fifteenth century, these two cultural lineages begin to appear side by side in a wide range of visual, literary and theatrical genres such as *Kyōgen*, Noh drama, *haikai* 俳諧 (popular linked verse) and *renga* 連歌 (classical linked verse). By the fourteenth century, warriors from the provinces had come to the capital in large numbers and aristocrats in the capital had fled to the provinces, taking court culture with them. The result was a new mixture of natural landscapes and associations, from both the capital and the provinces, which became the foundation for Japanese culture as we know it today.

#### 4 Seasonal Pyramid

In the Edo period (1600-1868), the practice of *haikai* 俳諧 (popular linked verse) became widespread among both aristocrats and urban commoners. The seventeen-syllable *hokku* 発句 (now called *haiku*), the opening verse of *haikai* linked verse, required a seasonal word (*kigo* 季語). By the eighteenth century, poets had compiled huge compendia or almanacs of seasonal words, reflecting what had become a seasonal pyramid and serving as a kind of cultural encyclopedias. At the top of the pyramid were the most prominent topics from classical Japanese poetry. These words had a very rich associations that the poet could employ for a variety of purposes.

##### Seasonal Pyramid

1. *Peak*. Cherry blossoms, small cuckoo (*hototogisu*), moon, bright leaves, and snow.
2. *2nd layer*. Spring rain (*harusame*), returning geese (autumn), orange blossoms (summer), warbler (spring), willow (spring), paulownia flower (summer).
3. *Wide base* (seasonal words from spring). Dandelion (*tanpopo*), garlic (*ninniku*), horseradish (*wasabi*), cat's love (*neko no koi*).

The second layer, lower down on the pyramid, consisted of lesser known seasonal words such as the frog (*kawazu* 蛙), which was thought to sing and was a spring *kigo*. At the bottom of the pyramid were literally thousands of new seasonal words, which came from a commoner life in both the cities and the provinces. A popular seasonal word for spring was cat's love (*neko no koi* 猫の恋), or 'cats in heat', in which a female cat squealed as a male cat chased her around. Spring words at the base included, for example, garlic and dandelion, which one could consider 'commoner' plants.

*Haikai* poets in the Edo period could freely explore both the top and bottom of the seasonal pyramid and often linked the two in surprising and humorous ways. The following example is a *hokku* (*haiku*) by Matsuo Bashō 松尾芭蕉:

*takotsubo ya hakanaki yume o natsu no tsuki*

octopus traps—  
fleeting dreams  
under the summer moon

Bashō has been travelling along the Inland Sea and comes to Akashi, near the present-day city of Kobe, where troops from the Heike warrior clan were slaughtered many centuries earlier on the beaches by the Genji warrior clan. The Genji warriors rushed down at night from the cliffs overlooking the Akashi beach, in a surprise attack, and slaughtered the Heike warriors camped on the beach. *Takotsubo* 蛸壺 (octopus traps), a word from the bottom of the pyramid, refers to the urns that were lowered into the water and that octopus would crawl into at night. The octopus in the traps are having "fleeting dreams", with no idea that in the morning they will be harvested, the way the Heike warriors were many centuries ago. The summer moon, from the top of the seasonal pyramid, is a very elegant image. Because summer was so hot, the evening moon was thought to bring a sense of coolness. Summer nights were also thought to be "fleeting" in that they were the shortest nights of the year. Here Bashō combines a classical image of impermanence with a down-to-earth and humorous image of the unknowing octopus to evoke a tragic historical past.

## 5 Seasonal Words in the Modern Period

In the modern period, *haiku* 俳句 continued to be very popular, but it was also a traumatic moment for poets as Japan moved from a lunar calendar, which had been the basis for all the seasonal words, to the Gregorian (solar) calendar. The seasonal words shifted about one month, often moving from one season to the next. The Meiji government also abandoned the

*Gosekku* (Five Annual Observances), which had been one of the major cultural markers of the seasons.

Under the Gregorian calendar *Tanabata* 七夕, the Star Festival, on the seventh of the Seventh Month, moved from the first month of autumn (in the lunar calendar) to July, to the end of summer. As an observance *Tanabata* became a summer festival, as it is today, but modern *haiku* poets opted to stick with *Tanabata* as an autumn topic because of the rich autumn cultural associations (two constellations, a man and a woman, separated by the Milky Way). Under the lunar calendar, New Year's Day and the beginning of spring had been together. But in the new calendar, which had been imported from the West, New Year's day and the beginning of spring were separated, as they are now. So today *haiku* poets carry five volumes of seasonal words: the four seasons plus New Year's, which now comes before spring.

Eventually, the seasonal words in *haiku* covered a wide range of social activities from food to fashion. A typical seasonal almanac (*saijiki* 歳時記) has about five to six thousands seasonal words. Since new phenomena constantly appear, there are always new seasonal words. New seasonal words for summer, for example, include yacht, sunglasses and t-shirts. Japanese drink beer all year around but, since beer is now closely associated with cold beer on hot summer nights, it became a seasonal word for summer.

