

# Haiku and the Seasons: an exploration

by Beverley George

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*The entire Japanese poetic tradition is grounded in the observance of the passing of the seasons, and it is quite simply second nature for Japanese to view human emotions through seasonal metaphors.*

Liza Dalby

The link between seasonal awareness and the writing of Japanese haiku is apparent. What is not so clear and causes much debate is whether this essential aspect of Japanese haiku can be successfully adopted into other cultural sensibilities and linguistic frameworks, including the English language.

In this article I would like to discuss the situation in Japan as I have observed it directly, rather than relying on readily accessible texts such as those by William J Higginson and Donald Keene and the pioneering work of RH Blyth, Harold G Henderson and James W Hackett, with which readers interested in haiku will already be familiar. I would then like to offer some thoughts about the importation of haiku into Australian writing and how it might be more widely understood and better incorporated. Three visits to Japan in the past two years and ten years of studying haiku do not an expert make, and I hope the tone of this paper is discursive and exploratory rather than in any way prescriptive. Writing haiku is a journey, not a destination, and it has many pilgrims.

## Part 1: Seasonal Poetry in Japan

### Separating the Seasons

Seasons are repetitive patterns of nature embedded with a varied mix of cultural habits (including cuisine) agricultural practices and livelihoods. Naturally, seasons influence people everywhere but Japanese people have honed their awareness of them to a remarkable degree of aesthetic sensibility.

Shibata Kyoko, a poet I met at a haiku workshop in Imabari on Shikoku in April 2007, writes to me about the sense of seasons of Japanese people:

I think such sense is our treasure from ancient people, and the practice of feeling a change of seasons delicately is beautiful. It's useful for making haiku, isn't it?

Within the changing of the seasons, we have a more subtle separation. There are two special days in a month that have names showing a change of seasons. So, strictly speaking, we have twenty-four seasons in a year!! For example, we have two special days, *Kanro* and *Sohkoh* in October. (*Kan*)*ro* means dew. *Kanro* means a seasonal dew is beginning to fall. And *Soh*(*koh*) means frost. *Sohkoh* means a season in which mountains and fields are covered with frost.

I have a favourite restaurant near my house. The restaurant changes their course dishes twice a month according to twenty-four seasons. As you know, Japanese dishes are not only delicious but also very beautiful. The chef needs a delicate sense of cooking influenced by the seasons.<sup>1</sup>

Explaining the 24 periods, Liza Dalby writes: 'The major ones include the solar solstices and equinoxes and the beginning of each season....But this accounts for only eight of these units. The remainder have inherited more descriptive tags such as "greater heat" and "lesser heat", or "cold dews" or "grain ripens".'<sup>2</sup>

### **Some everyday observations**

One of the delightful aspects of travelling in Japan in spring and autumn is to observe so many Japanese people actively celebrating seasonal transience in their own country. The sight of blue tarpaulins spread beneath the trees or red-covered benches to indicate that tea is available, is ubiquitous and cheerful.

Even the newspapers are enlivened by pictorial evidence of the way Japanese sensibility engages with the seasons. Here are some examples from *The Daily Yomiuri* I tore out on a recent trip. On November 25, 2007, centrally placed immediately under the banner on page one was a photograph of Mount Fuji bearing the caption, 'Lunar Landing: A full moon appears to be sitting atop Mt. Fuji as it gradually sinks early Saturday morning in Gotenba, Shizuoka Prefecture. When the mountain is crowned by a full moon it is called Pearl Fuji, when crowned by the sun it is called Diamond Fuji.' Nudged to the right was a Reuters article, 'Australian Labor claims victory in poll.' Enduring nature claiming precedence over the transience of politics. On November 26 the leading photograph on page 1 was titled Autumn Glow and the caption read 'Toki, Gifu Pref. – visitors to Sogi Park view autumn leaves illuminated by about 160 lights Saturday night.'

On page 3 of the same newspaper on November 28 was a stunning photograph titled 'Orange Curtain' – persimmons hung to dry outdoors in Kaninoyama, Yamagata Prefecture. Other articles in daily newspapers at this time included an informative one on the O-kamakiri mantis active in late autumn (one mantis was waiting for us in the centre of a village path the same morning), and an account of a trek through Tohoku, in the footsteps of Bashō where in 1689 he wrote one of the most famous travelogues in world literature, *Oku no Hosomichi* (The Narrow Road to the Deep North). An item on Ogi (*Miscanthus*) Japanese silver plume grass, one of the seven flowers of autumn was accompanied by a waka (the name for Japanese tanka poetry until around 1900) from a 12<sup>th</sup> century imperial anthology, the *Shinkokinshu*, which laments the havoc this grass can wreak on gardens. Yet the Ogi is respected and I noticed how it appears, often linked to a red moon, on many pieces in the famous Bizen pottery area.

I have provided this considerable amount of detail on the newsworthiness of nature in daily life deliberately. By way of contrast it would not be unusual for an Australian newspaper to feature on its leading pages photographs of floods or bushfires, but it would be unusual to show, as part of the news, the advent of flannel flowers in spring, the appearance of wattle in late winter and summer swathes of kangaroo grass, accompanied by a poem.

Letters from Japanese friends almost always begin with a comment on the weather or reference to a festival. On a more mundane level, even the type of canned drinks in vending machines change from summer to autumn.<sup>2</sup>

In 2007 Matsuyama celebrated the one hundred year anniversary of the poet Shiki, who was a leader in reforming haiku, previously known as hokku. Hokku was the starting verse of linked writing, separated and developed by Bashō into a poem with its own entity, but retaining seasonal orientation. Matsuyama has a museum dedicated to Shiki and this was the location of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Pacific Rim Haiku Conference in April 2007 at which I was invited to present a paper on haiku in Australia. A highlight of my own haiku-writing experience was to sit beneath cherry trees at Matsuyama Castle, picnicking with friends and writing haiku. On a blue tarpaulin, of course.

### ***Kami* – the spirit of things.**

‘Appreciation of the four seasons in Japan is so ritualised and profound, it may be considered a religion.’<sup>3</sup> The two religions of Japan, Shinto (indigenous) and Buddhism (imported, but long-established) seem to sit happily side by side and support this appreciation. On several occasions, I have heard it said in Japan that it is best to live like a follower of Shinto and be buried as a Buddhist. A neat piece of pragmatism.

It makes it easier to grasp how the Japanese spirit of the seasons influences their poetry if one thinks about the basic premises of Shinto, summarised here in a lecture at the Parliament of the World’s Religions in Barcelona in 2004 by Rev. Munemichi Kurozumi:

Our ancestors, who obtained an enduring way of life through the diffusion of rice farming, experienced a simple sense of awe at the powerful ‘life’ of a single grain of rice, and the way in which it multiplies many hundred-fold in the autumn harvest. In turn they felt a sense of simple and direct reverence for all things which helped nurture and sustain that rice, from the land itself, to water, wind, and the source of them all – the sun. In this sense of reverence one can see the beginnings of Shinto. Shinto is a spiritual tradition of gratitude for the blessings of the *kami*, the object of worship in Shinto. And Shinto is a tradition of warm and intimate spiritual communication between *kami* and human beings.... [Shinto] is a religion born and nurtured within everyday life.<sup>4</sup>

So if we think about respect for the *kami* that lie in the mountain, the pebble, the mouse, the tree, we start to understand the close observation of natural phenomena and the sense of transience that permeate Japanese haiku.

In November 2007 I was privileged to attend a sunrise greeting ceremony by followers of Kurozumikyo Shinto, on a wooden platform high in the mountains. It was a profound experience.

### **Some thoughts about Japanese haiku**

Japanese people’s attention to detail is legendary. It’s evident in their food preparation and the plates they choose to serve it on, in their clothing, the precise time-tabling of their trains and the ways in which they shape their trees, groom the moss and sweep up fallen cherry blooms.

Haiku itself is about the observation of detail and the awareness of transience. It is common for haiku poets to write their own death poem around the age of seventy. This gives the poet a chance to express how their life has been spent and how they might like to be remembered.

In Japan, anyone is welcome to write this diminutive genre. 'Haiku was born among common people, was perfected by the common people and has returned to the common people. In addition, it allows the writer to write about any subject in daily life.'<sup>5</sup>

This does not mean that it is not taken seriously. An insight into the activities of Japanese haiku-writing groups led by highly respected haijin (haiku masters) is provided by American diplomat, Abigail Friedman, in *The Haiku Apprentice*. Friedman recounts in detail her experiences within one such group over a two year period in Japan.<sup>6</sup> William J Higginson, author of *The Haiku Handbook*, writes of *The Haiku Apprentice*, 'No other book in English gives such rich insight into how it feels to participate in haiku writing, Japanese style.'

At the Shiki Museum bookshop in Matsuyama, I came across a remarkable small book titled *If someone asks...Masaoka Shiki's Life and Haiku*.<sup>7</sup> To produce this book, sixteen Japanese volunteer English guides came together to study Shiki for two years under the guidance of Museum staff. After this, for several years more they translated the monthly Shiki haiku that was posted in the lobby of the Museum. When it was finally decided they might compile a selection of Shiki's haiku into book form with notes 'that would portray Shiki, the man,' the group split into four and each smaller group read haiku relevant to one of the seasons. Eventually, from the 23,600 haiku Shiki wrote, one hundred and sixteen were selected for translation.

What makes the collection pertinent to this discussion, is that although the haiku are arranged chronologically from when Shiki was eighteen to when his last poem was written at thirty-five, they are carefully indexed by season. Each haiku is presented in the original Japanese, the English translation and the romanised version of the Japanese, followed by the season and the identification of the season word as, for example, 'autumn: chirping of insects' or 'summer: green gale.' Many entries are accompanied by a *maegaki*, a type of preface which states where or when the haiku was written or provides other background information. It is the identification of the season word and the *maegaki* which are particularly useful to anyone who wants to know more about Japanese haiku.

### **The Concept of *ma***

The Japanese kanji character for *ma* depicts the sun shining through the gap of a two-leaved gate. *Ma* is contained space – the space between objects. Examples in Japanese design include food served so it does not cover the plate, disciplined flower arrangement, tatami mat rooms uncluttered by furniture, and gardens where the plantings are interspersed with raked white gravel and pines pruned so that spaces between branches define the tree.

*Ma* also refers to time, the intervals between actions and events, between sounds and silences. Its relevance for theatre, music and conversation are evident as is its

application to the writing of haiku, in whatever language. Allowing space for a reader's own interpretive imagination is a component of memorable haiku.

### **Seasonal references (*kigo*) in Japanese haiku**

Seasonal words used in Japanese haiku are not spontaneous to the individual. Literary authorities approve nouns and noun phrases as *kigo* by including them, along with haiku which illustrate their correct application, in *sajiki* – collections of *kigo* arranged by season. At the surface level a *kigo* indicates a particular season, or point within it. For example 'coloured oak leaves' or 'acorn' denote autumn; 'fox' or 'hare' winter, and 'bats' or 'grazing cows' summer. Further discipline is exacted by the fact that, although Japan stretches over two thousand kilometres from north to south and therefore experiences a wide variation of climatic conditions at any one time, seasonal references were devised for the area of Honshu near to the former capital, Kyoto. An Australian comparison might be if the seasonal changes experienced in Sydney, for example, were imposed on nature writing composed in Hobart, Alice Springs or Adelaide.

In addition to locating a point in the seasonal calendar, each season word conveys a seasonal feel (*kido*). Through their usage over hundreds of years and millions of haiku, season words have acquired connotations and allusions that cannot be separated from the seasonal denotation. Season words are well recognised in Japan and integral to the depth and appeal of Japanese haiku.

### **In the Year of the Mouse**

If I needed further reminding of Japanese engagement with the seasons, correspondence during new year 2008 has taken care of that. Greeting cards, electronic messages, photographs of new year displays in the home, and a painting with calligraphy (*ga-san*) have all helped me share the celebration of New Year, Japanese style. Even nicer have been the accounts of how my friends visited the temples on New Year's Eve, some in light snow, and heard the huge bells struck one hundred and eight times. From Imabari, leader of the SGG haiku group, Tomita Shigeo, writes of a Buddhist temple bell on a hill at Asakura that can be heard everywhere within a five kilometre radius.

Traditional fare for the New Year are *toshikoshi soba*, a noodle dish. On January 7 the recommended meal is *nanakusa-gayu*, a humble rice porridge with seven herbs and vegetables to set the stomach aright after the indulgences of the season.

The close attention paid to each day passing, brings literary content into the ambit of daily life and influences its nature. Inextricably embedded in all this celebration is the reading and writing of poetry that from the 7<sup>th</sup> century on has paid heed to the seasons.

### **Part 2 Writing haiku in Australia**

In the current issue of *Stylus Poetry Journal*, Janice M Bostok, a pioneer of haiku and tanka in Australia writes:

The poets of each country, while embracing Japanese forms, need to internalise their cultural origins and hope that they will become distinctive of their own country. We need to have some empathy with the form, be able to adapt and adopt certain cultural events and exchange the expression and

enthusiasm for them into our own cultural events. For example, Christmas, Easter, Anzac Day, our type of football and cricket. The urge to divorce Japanese forms from Japan's culture and activities (while striving to become closer to the Japanese outer form) is a problem. There are those who believe that English language forms are not Japanese forms and never can be. Others try to parallel Japanese forms so closely that they become artificially eastern in flavour.<sup>8</sup>

Is there a middle path? John Bird, another long-term exponent of haiku writing in Australia believes there is: 'Most haiku writers in Australia fit between these extremes. For our purposes we don't need to accurately locate ourselves in this spectrum. It is sufficient that we acknowledge the separate identity of Japanese haiku and English language haiku.'

The Japanese themselves are not confused about the differences either, as is illustrated in *The Matsuyama Declaration* at The Shimanami Kaido International Haiku Convention – 12 September 1999

The *Declaration* is well worth studying in its entirety but if I may quote a passage, particularly relevant to this discussion:

#### **The Problems of *Teikei* (fixed form) and *Kigo* (season words)**

A common issue that always comes up in discussions of international haiku, is how to deal with the fixed form of 5-7-5 syllables and kigo in other languages and cultures.

First of all, the 5-7-5 rhythm is unique to the Japanese language, and even if other languages were to use this rhythm, it is obvious that it would not guarantee the same effect. *Teikei* is not a matter of syllable count or accent, but the matter of the way poetic expression could be heightened through tension when the writer wants it. In the case of Japanese poetry, the best method of increasing poetic tension was the 5-7-5 syllable form

In addition the techniques and rhetoric that are used in this fixed form are innately Japanese. There are many types of haiku. For example, there are haiku that express a reality that is instantly perceived, and haiku that use *kireji* (words that are cut for a surrealistic effect) to construct another world as formative arts. ...

Next is the issue of *kigo* (season words). Japanese haiku is a 'gift from nature'. Hence kigo is indivisibly linked to haiku. While it is extremely important to describe nature by perceiving the relationship between nature and human beings based on the haiku insight, it doesn't necessarily have to be in the form of kigo. In other words when we discuss haiku from a global perspective, the contents of haiku will have a closer relation with each country's local characteristics.

Therefore, when haiku spreads to the rest of the world, it is important to treat it as a short-formed poem and to take methods suitable to each language. For a poem to be recognised worldwide as haiku, it must be short-formed and have an essential spirit of haiku.<sup>5</sup>

One way in which there is a growing similarity in Australia to the Japanese example, is the formation of a number of haiku-writing groups. 'Haiku originates from haikai, which is a group-oriented literary art and structurally it requires others....So a haiku poet takes a creative method that is different from the typical modern poet who writes poetry in isolation.'<sup>5</sup>

Liza Dalby, in *East Wind Melts the Ice: A Memoir through the Seasons*, reverts to the ancient Chinese Almanac of 72 separate periods of five days each and writes not only about what is happening in Japan in each of these periods but also what is happening in her garden in California. It's an admirably constructed book and well worth careful perusal, but the problem for Australian writers is that it describes only northern hemisphere seasons and seasonal symbolic references.

By comparison with Japanese kigo and saijiki discussed in section one of this article, southern hemisphere seasons and Australian cultural references remain largely uncharted and unshared by the haiku community.

John Bird is an Australian haiku poet who has given much thought to how Australians can develop their own symbolic references. John writes:

The issue of *kigo*/seasonality in English language haiku written outside Japan can at least be addressed, perhaps even resolved, once the Japanese Haiku/English language haiku distinction is made. My own travels on this path are summarised in: *An Australian Seasoning* [http://users.mullum.com.au/jbird/jb\\_H\\_seasons.html](http://users.mullum.com.au/jbird/jb_H_seasons.html) and *Haiku Dreaming Australia* <http://haikudreamingaustralia.info/> specifically in the articles *about dreaming, nailing down the dream and coming clean on kigo*.<sup>9</sup>

Asked to summarise his views, John responded:

In addition to season, *kigo* convey Japanese traditions in that country's history, culture, geography and literature. It is *kigo* that let the slight haiku form aspire to literature. In Australia we can not effectively use Japanese *kigo*, or an Australian version of it. Seasonality will not provide depth to English language haiku, as it does for the Japanese. However there are words, phrases and images which are rich and evocative for Australians and which can save our haiku from the trivial. *The search for the golden boomerang*. It starts with writing haiku on Australian themes – Australian Haiku Dreaming.<sup>9</sup>

### **In summary**

Abigail Friedman writes, 'Much of the challenge and excitement of writing haiku in the West comes from the fact that there are no commonly agreed-upon rules. This is not so far removed from the situation in Japan. There, contemporary poets are challenging the existing haiku rules; in the West we are struggling to create them.'

My own view is that it is inappropriate to adopt a genre so deeply embedded in another country's culture without trying to understand its origin and basis and afford it due respect.

However I also think it is foolish to write poetry that celebrates nature in any projected setting with which we are unfamiliar. In other words haiku is best served when we look at what lies around us and write simply about that, in the spirit of the genre.

For me, haiku is like photography or painting. It makes us observe more attentively, absorb more. It helps us celebrate each moment going by.

## References

<sup>1</sup> personal correspondence

<sup>2</sup> Dalby, Liza *East Wind Melts the Ice* London, Chatto & Windus, 2007

<sup>3</sup> MacArthur, Ann [Notes for travellers with the Art Gallery of New South Wales.]

<sup>4</sup> Kurozumi, Rev Munemichi *Teaching of Sincerity – A Shinto Pathway to Peace*. Lecture at the Parliament of the World's Religions Barcelona, July 8, 2004

<sup>5</sup> The Matsuyama Declaration (The Shimamami Kaido International Haiku Convention – 12 September 99)

<sup>6</sup> Friedman, Abigail *The Haiku Apprentice: Memoirs of Writing Poetry in Japan* Berkeley, Stone Bridge Press, 2006

<sup>7</sup> *If Someone Asks. . . Masaoka Shiki's Life and Haiku* translated by the Shiki-kinen Museum English Volunteers, Matsuyama Municipal Shiki-Kinen Museum, 2001

<sup>8</sup> Stylus [www.styluspoetryjournal.com] January 2008

<sup>9</sup> personal correspondence

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This article was first published in *Five Bells* 15 (1) 2008.