

BOOK REVIEW

Japan and the Culture of the Four Seasons: Nature, Literature, and the Arts

Haruo Shirane

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All of us who study Japan will no doubt have at least some vague idea of the all-important role the seasons play in so many different areas of Japanese culture. The great virtue of Haruo Shirane's *Japan and the Culture of the Four Seasons* is that it enables us, for the first time in English, to gain a comprehensive, systematic and authoritatively scholarly view of how very pervasive this seasonal culture is and has been since the Nara and Heian periods. The book's central argument is also original and thought-provoking: that the supposedly close relation to nature and the seasons in *waka* and the manifold other arts, crafts and cultural practices influenced by that classical poetic tradition has actually been a relation not with nature-in-itself but with a man-made "secondary" nature. This argument, sustained throughout the book, certainly provides an interesting new perspective from which to re-think the whole important issue of Japanese culture's relation to nature. But I also think it is a deeply problematic argument, both from a philosophical and a literary-critical perspective.

Philosophically it merely states a truism applicable to all poetry. From an ontological point of view, all poetic imagery of nature is secondary—or indeed, if one is a Platonist, tertiary, since Plato thought that even visible nature is but a shadow of reality. Therefore it makes no sense, philosophically at least, to single out any one particular poetic tradition as representing nature on a more "secondary" level than any other poetic tradition. Is, for instance, Wordsworth's daffodil more "primary" than Basho's frog? If that were a Zen *kōan*, one might answer: "Croak! Croak!"

Furthermore, even as a literary-critical term of convenience, "secondary nature" is unsustainable in the long run—for instance, once we move from Heian to Muromachi and Edo poetry. Yes, Heian court poets like Ki no Tsurayuki and Fujiwara no Shunzei had a rather restrictive view of the aspects of nature that were appropriately "poetic," and generally preferred to use natural imagery that was "graceful and elegant" and gave rise to feelings of pleasure and harmony. But, as Shirane himself points out, one of the defining characteristics of later medieval and early modern poetry was precisely the breaking down of these restrictions. The puzzled reader might well ask, then: at what point does nature in this new poetry become primary rather than secondary? Are all those images of earthy, erotic, frightening, and inelegant nature so abundant in Edo haikai, which would certainly have offended the refined tastes of the Heian courtiers, not "real" enough to be considered "primary?" Shirane does not address this question. Rather, doggedly determined to apply

his term “secondary nature” to the whole of the Japanese poetic tradition, he expands its meaning to include even poetic images of “nature in the raw” (e.g., the clamorous sexual intercourse of cats) that would have made a Heian courtier’s hair stand on end. At one point he does admit that it “would be hard to call beer or a short-sleeved shirt [seasonal words in modern haiku] a form of secondary nature” (p. 217). But he does not pursue the theoretical implications of this admission.

Actually, there is an important larger literary-critical issue at stake here too, beyond even the history of Japanese poetry: our tendency to view and evaluate the literatures of the past through our own rather narrow lens of what might be called “modern realism.” What, after all, is “real” or “primary” nature, or, more to the point, poetic truth in the representation of nature? As Makoto Ueda has pointed out, poets such as Matsuo Bashō sought, in their hermetical retreat, “a reclusive life devoted to a quest for eternal truth in nature” (Ueda, *Bashō and His Interpreters*, p. 4). One wonders whether Shirane would nonetheless consider Bashō’s nature “secondary,” even in those famous late haiku pervaded by a tragic sense of nature’s loneliness and desolation?

No doubt this is far from Shirane’s intention, but his central argument might give the impression, especially to those readers as yet unconvinced of the greatness of the Japanese poetic tradition, that much of the classical poetry is of “secondary” status: precious, affected, artificial, and in general further removed from the truth or reality of nature than the poetry of other traditions. Widening his argument even further, he makes the provocative suggestion, in the final paragraph of the book, that the relatively poor record of the Japanese in protecting their environment may also have been because their supposed closeness to nature was only a closeness to secondary nature: “the extensive cultural seasonalization and the pervasive presence of secondary nature may have dulled the sense of urgency with regard to conservation and the need to save the environment....” (p. 219). Thus he generalizes what was, at most, an aesthetic prejudice of some Heian aristocrats into an all-pervasive tendency of Japanese culture, from ancient times to the present. Although in a uniquely negative form, this seems to me to verge on the kind of *nihonjinron* discourse about the “special relationship” between the Japanese and nature that Shirane himself rightly calls into question earlier in this book.

REFERENCES

Ueda 1991

Makoto Ueda. *Bashō and His Interpreters: Selected Hokku with Commentary*. Stanford University Press, 1991.

Reviewed by Roy Starrs