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EDITORIAL

New season(s) for Mutual Images Journal

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Dear readers,

Welcome to Mutual Images Research Journal, no. 12, our yearly collection of academic writings that in every issue focus on one or, sometimes, two themes, developed in an array of coordinated articles.

We enjoyed titling this instalment "New season(s) for Mutual Images Journal" playing on the fact that, on the one hand, this issue really marks a new beginning of sort for the journal, as we briefly explain in the following lines of this Editorial; and also because, on the other hand, the entire issue hosts the proceedings — duly turned into a solid set of research papers and full-fledged articles — of a 2022 workshop that was devoted to the study of how the year's seasons are portrayed in a selection of exemplary cases from Japanese traditional and contemporary cultures.

Seasons are a beautiful example of the cyclical nature of time and our experiences. Seasonality teaches us to accept the changes that escape our control and to enjoy the different moments. Connected to this contemplative, though not necessarily passive, perspective, our journal defends this attitude from a critical perspective inspired by multidisciplinary approaches but with great respect for the knowledge that the Arts and Humanities contribute to academic knowledge.

This is not an arbitrary claim. It is well known that, in current times, the Humanities are not in their best moment. In Europe, particularly the United Kingdom but sadly a common situation across many European Union countries, universities and higher education institutions are closing departments due to the declining demand for students in these degree programs (The Guardian, 2024; Dixon, 2024). When cost-benefit arguments are the only ones that can save the work of scholars, it is then that we realize the value of initiatives like ours — Open Access scholars who, independently, allow for the exploration of human nature in a creative, rigorous, and free manner.

Thus, in this new issue, we delve into the symbolism of the seasons, alternating between cultural and spiritual readings through various media, with literature as the central axis that coordinates these interpretations. The writings in this issue, including both shorter papers and longer essays that form an organic ensemble, all stem from one of the annual workshops organized by the Mutual Images Research Association since its inception in 2014. This particular workshop took place in Bucharest, hosted and co-created with the JSCS (Sembazaru Centre for Japanese Studies) in November 2022. Its title: "Seasonal Imagery in Japanese Language, Culture and Literature." You will find this collection starting on page 8.Mutual Images Journal (MIJ) is entering a new phase with the adoption of a refreshed visual layout. The new design draws inspiration from leading journals in the social sciences and serves as one of the cornerstones of our strategic plan

for the next three years. In the short term, a key objective will be also to improve the journal's indexation in major academic databases and to secure sponsorships that will support the long-term sustainability of the Mutual Images project.

We also believe that this redesign brings a welcome change—enhancing the reading experience by making it more visually engaging—while retaining core elements of our previous visual identity, including the original fonts and colour palette.

We hope you enjoy the new look!

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Frentiu, R., Ilis, F., Birlea, O., Tudorica, C. and Tosu, I. (2024). Echoes of Nature: Exploring Sensibility Across Japanese Culture, Literature and Artistic Expression. *Mutual Images*, 12, 12-14. https://doi.org/10.32926/2024.intro

INTRODUCTION

Echoes of Nature: Exploring Sensibility Across Japanese Culture, Literature and Artistic Expression

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This volume of *Mutual Images Research Journal* is a collective analysis of seasonal imagery in Japanese society. As we witness the shifting landscapes and moods mirrored in nature's transformation, we are reminded of the profound parallels between the seasonal cycle and the transience of life. In embracing the beauty of each season, from the cherry blossoms (*sakura*) marking the arrival of spring, to the role of haiku and visual and performing arts in conveying Japanese sensibility towards nature, the present volume intends to showcase the Japanese worldview through the spectrum of nature. In Japan, the changing seasons hold profound cultural significance, influencing everything from traditional customs, culinary habits to festivals and artistic expression. Through the genius of haiku poets and the different colours of the traditional *kimono*, marking the change of seasons, we explore how people in Japan have woven the essence of nature into the fabric of their daily lives. Through the lens of art, literature, and both traditional and contemporary culture, we celebrate the rich diversity of seasonal experiences across various facets of Japanese artistic creativity and literary expressions.

This collection of contributions stems from an online event that we, the collective of the *Sembazuru Centre for Japanese Studies* (SCJS], hosted and co-organised at the invitation of our fellow scholars at Mutual Images Research Association (MIRA), in November 2022: a one-day workshop which gathered both established scholars and emerging researchers in the field of Japanese studies. Welcome and opening speeches were delivered by Aurore Yamagata-Montoya, PhD, Chair of Mutual Images Research Association (France), his Excellency, Mr Hiroshi Ueda, Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Ambassador (Japanese Embassy in Romania), and Rodica Frentiu, Prof. PhD Habil., Chair of the Department of Asian Languages and Literatures (Babes-Bolyai University, Romania) and of SCJS.

We had the honour to start our workshop with the presentation of the esteemed Professor Emeritus, Yoshihiko Ikegami (Tokyo University, Japan), whose presentation on "How the 'Coming of Spring' is Differently Encoded Linguistically across Languages: An Interim Report" revealed the nuances of seasonal change expressed in Japanese and English languages. We extend our heartfelt gratitude to Yoshihiko Ikegami-*sensei* for gracing us with his expertise and insights, enriching our understanding and igniting a passion for cross-cultural exploration and linguistic inquiry.

The workshop focussed on the theme of seasons in Japanese culture and language across different panels. The first panel, "The Seasons in Visual and Performance Arts", aimed to provide a comprehensive look at how nature's transience is depicted in theatre, film, music, traditional clothing, and arts, setting the stage for the subsequent panel. Titled "The Seasons in Japanese Literature", this panel explored the portrayal of all seasons in poetry and prose, revealing the deep connection between human experiences and the

changing seasons. Finally, the third panel, "Perception of the Japanese Seasons in Popular Culture", brought the subject into the contemporary realm, offering insights into how modern culture and society shape, and are shaped by, perceptions of seasonal transitions.

Our workshop wrapped up with a special panel dedicated to commemorating 50 years since the passing of Kawabata Yasunari and was intended to be a recollection of the writer's profound influence on Japanese literature and culture. As we reflect on seasonal imagery, linguistic diversity, and cultural expression explored throughout this volume, let us carry forward the spirit of Kawabata's timeless words and continue to draw inspiration from the beauty of the natural world and the depth of human experience. In honouring Kawabata's memory, may we remain committed to preserving and promoting the invaluable contributions of literary giants like him, ensuring that their legacy continue to illuminate and inspire generations to come.

Finally, we want to express again our deepest thanks to the collective of MIRA for offering us the wonderful opportunity to co-organise this international workshop.

SCJS: The Sembazuru Centre for Japanese Studies (SCJS), the first centre of its kind in Babeş-Bolyai University, was founded in 2008 together with the Department for Asian Languages and Literature, when the Japanese Language and Literature major was added to the Faculty of Letters' curricula. Creating SCJS is an implicit step towards recognising the research activity in this field, and it plays a vital role in consolidating Babes-Bolyai University's school of Japanese studies. During this time, the Sembazuru Centre for Japanese Studies has supported and completed the analytical curriculum of the Japanese Language and Literature major, initiating various actions to broaden and consolidate relationships with universities and diverse organizations from Japan.

Rodica Frentiu (ORCID: 0000-0003-4336-3859) is currently a professor at Babes-Bolyai University, Romania, and Head of the Department of Asian Languages and Literatures. She has written over one hundred articles on Japanese poetics, cultural semiotics and Japanese calligraphy, such as Intellectual Conscience and Self-Cultivation (shūyō) as Imperatives in Japan's Modernization: Mori Ōgai, Youth (2016). She has curated solo, and group shows of Japanese calligraphy in Romania and Japan (at venues such as the Hyogo Prefectural Museum of Art in 2002; The Japan Foundation in 2007; the Embassy of Romania to Japan in 2015). She was awarded the Gold Prize at the very first International Japanese Calligraphy Exhibition (at Yasuda Women's University in Hiroshima, Japan in 2016, in the Brush Writing Section) and the Platinum Prize at an event titled Connect the World (as part of the International Japanese Calligraphy Exhibition, Global Shodo @ Yasuda in Hiroshima, Japan in 2017, in the Character Design Section).

Florina Ilis (0000-0003-4633-4279) is a Romanian writer and university lecturer. She is lecturer in the Department of Asian Languages and Literatures at Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, and department head in the Department of Bibliographic Research and Documentation, Lucian Blaga Central University Library. Her first appearance as an author was with the haiku book *Haiku şi caligrame* (2000), followed by acclaimed novels such as *Coborârea de pe cruce* (2001) and *Chemarea lui Matei* (2002). Her novel *Cruciada copiilor* (*The Children's Crusade*) in 2005 won several awards, among them the Romanian Academy's Ion Creangă Prize. Ilis's writing often explores Japanese literature and cultural themes, which are reflected through her 2020 work *Introducere în istoria literaturii japoneze de la începuturi până în epoca modernă.*

Oana Bîrlea (ORCID: 0009-0006-5869-5070) is a lecturer in Japanese language at Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca, Romania, within the Faculty of Letters and the Faculty of European Studies. Her areas of interest are Japanese advertising discourse, *kawaii* (cuteness) culture, and soft power in cultural communication. Bîrlea has published widely on the semiotics of cuteness, discussing how kawaii aesthetics function as tools of persuasion for commercial and public communication. Her principal works are the book *Cultura Kawaii şi Discursul Publicitar Japonez* and papers such as "Soft Power: 'Cute Culture', a Persuasive Strategy in Japanese Advertising" and "Hybridity in Japanese Advertising Discourse". She contributes to the new field of "Cute Studies," researching the cultural function of kawaii symbols in Japanese culture.

Ciliana Tudorica (ORCID: 0000-0002-1381-4412) is a specialist in Japanese aesthetics and, more precisely, in *shodō*, traditional Japanese calligraphy. Her work discusses the philosophical concepts of "emptiness" (kū) and "nothingness" (mu) as the central themes of the creation and interpretation of calligraphic art. Tudorica's academic work emphasizes how the visual and spatial arrangement in Japanese art is shaped by these Zen-inspired ideas. She has published in the *Journal of Modernism and Postmodernism Studies* (*JOMOPS*), among her work on the double composition of *shodō*. Her research is interdisciplinary, drawing on philosophy, art history, and cultural studies to offer a nuanced analysis of Japanese visual culture.

Ioana Toşu (ORCID: 0009-0000-2846-1843) is a Romanian scholar and practitioner in linguistics and content management. She is a Ph.D. candidate at the Doctoral School of the Faculty of Letters, Babeş-Bolyai University, where she is also an Associate Lecturer. She is interested in the field of phonology, with particular interest in syllable structure and Japanese linguistics. She is working in parallel with her studies as a Global Regulatory Content Analyst with Japanese by Wolters Kluwer Financial Services Romania.

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Dressed by Nature, Adorned by Design: Seeing and reading the Seasons with Kimono

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Abstract: Various studies of Japanese arts and crafts have brought evidence that objects designed in Japan materially and aesthetically reflect the characteristics of the country's climate and its people's appreciation of nature. The kimono is no exception, with numerous demonstrations showing that in its very conception, modes of production as well as in the way it is coloured and patterned, Japanese nature is present, through a literal or symbolical connection with the seasons. By looking at specific modes of kimono production as well as pattern designs that match the iconic "four seasons of Japan", artistic inspirations and newly "imported" seasons, this article proposes to visually survey the different ways seasons are harmoniously or at times paradoxically expressed in kimono design. In addition, poems and passages from novels that have a connection with kimono will be examined, furthering the deep connections between design, Japanese culture and the life of the people who are "seasoning the seasons" in and with kimono.

Keywords: *Kimono design; Kimono patterns; Japanese culture; Japanese Aesthetics; Seasons.*

As analysed in studies of Japanese arts and crafts, the objects designed in Japan reflect the characteristics of the country's indigenous climate and unique landmarks as well as the people's cultural, at times emotional, sense of nature (Asquith & Kalland, 1997; Matsuoka & Noble, 2020; Shirane, 2013).

In particular, Watsuji Tetsurō — following the argument that says things are determined materially, symbolically and aesthetically because of the specific time and place they are created in — highlighted how systematically and intricately nature/climate or *fūdo* (風土) intersect with human experiences, objects and arts:

> *"The relationship between weather and vegetation can be transferred to the description of men's minds and hearts. […] [Why Japanese] still cling as fondly as ever to their kimono, their rice and their tatami is grounded in the reason that these are capable of expressing best of all changes of mood and temper that correspond to the seasons or to morning and evening."* (1961, pp. 201-02)

A statement mirrored by Anesaki Masaharu, who phrased the following:

> *"[Japanese live] too close to nature to antagonize [it] […] Just as art has permeated every corner of life in Japan, […] Japanese art always derives its model and inspiration from nature. […] Life varies according to the varying seasons, and the Japanese derives the artistic enjoyment which [they] find an essential part of life from [their] ability to respond to nature's suggestions and inspirations."* (1974 [1932], pp. 6-7)

Focusing on the makers' physical appreciation of the material destined to be used for their crafts, Christine Guth notes that nature is dynamically and systematically intertwined in any creative process:

> *"To give form to the myriad varieties of crafts […], makers joined forces and worked with nature. […] Craft makers understood the consequences of their actions in and on the natural world, because they had to work with the resources available to them and readjust their practice when circumstances changed. They were sensitive to the transformative and generative powers of their chosen materials and how to put these to best use with suitable tools and technologies. […] Through extended training […] markers brought to their practice dexterous, rhythmic movements and a highly developed sensitivity to the potentialities of materials. This reservoir of embodied knowledge did not lend itself readily to verbal translation. Practitioners learned by feeling their way with and through wood, clay, cotton and silk. Making, whatever its specificities, was thus a sensate experience involving both mind and body."* (2021, pp. 194-95)

The study of kimono brings various evidence demonstrating a profound understanding of the above positions and considerations. Japanese nature is indeed present in the very conception and modes of production of kimono as well as in the way kimono is adorned. More precisely, a kimono in its physical, practical, and cultural aspects, signals nature in multiple ways. There is an organic integration of nature in the kimono's "system" that can be seen through the way fibers (silk or plant based) are harvested and woven, and through the attention paid to patterns (level of finesse in the details, overall placement, size and colour palette). On this specific side of the system, an intricate network of visual references can be found, with a multitude of associations of iconic plants, flowers, animals and landscape which as a result create an appealing atmosphere, a wearable decor that engages the body in a multi-sensory manner (visual sense, smell, touch) as well as memories.

Dressing in kimono thus leads to the idea of embracing a mode of dress that displays "time passing by" in a multilayered manner. In other words, the way a kimono is made, from fibers to patterns, demonstrates a deep sensitivity to nature and nature-made material, to how flowers, foliage and plants grace the world. By concomitance, dressing in a kimono hints at how elegantly human beings can inhabit their reality, season after season.

By looking at specific modes of kimono production as well as pattern designs that match the iconic "four seasons of Japan", artistic inspirations and newly "imported" seasons, this article proposes to visually survey the different ways seasons are harmoniously or at times paradoxically expressed in kimono design. In addition, poems and passages from novels that have a connection with kimono will be examined, furthering the deep connections between design, Japanese culture and the life of the people who are "seasoning the seasons" in and with kimono. The navigation within this multimodal network of references will be twofold: firstly, it looks at the creation and practice of kimono and how this side of the culture surrounding this specific garment highlights general ideas of *Japaneseness*. Secondly, it looks at the patterns themselves and how they reflect a certain playful take on how to present seasonal markers and seasonal changes.

Part 1: Seasons and kimono: curated *Japaneseness*

1.1 Seasonal modes of creation

Looking at kimono production and the connection between human techniques and nature, a deep and broad level of intertwined forces quickly becomes evident. Firstly, seasons can be noted to influence the cultivation of silkworms and cocoons, the harvesting the fibers and dyeing plants (Van Assche, 2005) as well as the timing in building up dyeing material, such as the *sukumo* (*藍*) or fermented leaves that serve as a base for indigo dyeing vats (Iwano & Schalkoff, 2015, pp. 154-55; Tsujioka *et al.*, 2022, p. 9; Vejar & Rodriguez, 2020, p. 100).

The weaving process is equally impacted by the seasons, with local reports that highlight how time sensitive it is to create kimono fabrics such as *Bashōfu* (*芭蕉布*) or textile make of banana tree fiber in Okinawa. Traditionally, the harvests happen twice a year in spring (February-March) and in autumn (late September to October) (Hendrickx, 2007, p. 216). There are also several accounts that note how the material gathered in autumn gives harder fibers than the ones in spring (Nomura *et al.*, 2017, p. 318). In the Northern regions, acute awareness of seasonal timing appears in the production of *Echigo Jōfu/Ojiya Chijimi* (*越後上布 /小千谷縮*) textiles, that are woven in the winter and later on blanched over snow (Figure 1)(Nitanai, 2017, p. 152).

Figure 1. Snow Bleaching (yuki sarashi) of Echigo Jōfu bolts of fabric. Photo: courtesy of Echigo Jōfu and Ojiya Chijimi Technical Preservation Association, Minamiuonuma and Kyoto Women's University (Kyoto Women's University Lifestyle Design Laboratory, 2024) .

The *yuki sarashi* (*雪晒し*) or blanching / bleaching fabric using snow and sunshine is an essential process that does not only "completes" the treatment of the original bolt of fabric but also preserves the kimono over time, when the whole process is repeated regularly afterwards. A slow-paced, patient method showcased in Kawabata Yasunari's novel *Snow Country*: throughout the story, the main character Shimamura periodically goes to the mountains of Yuzawa, Niigata prefecture, for a "cleansing retreat" into the snow, either for himself or for his collection of kimono. Doing so, he meshes the practical and the sentimental together as he reconnects with the land of his valued kimono and his precious relationship with a Komako, a geisha who lives there all year round. As is seen in the following passage:

> *"The thread was spun in the snow, and the cloth woven in the snow, washed in the snow and bleached in the snow. Everything, from the first spinning of the thread to the last finishing touches, was done in the snow. […] The Chijimi grass-linen of this snow country was the handwork of the mountain maiden through the long, snowbound winters.[…] The girls learned to weave as children, and they turned out their best work between the ages of of perhaps fourteen and twenty-four. […] They put their whole labor and love into this product of the long snowbound months […] between October […] when the spinning began, and mid-February of the following year, when the last bleaching was finished. [Shimamura always felt it was a lot of trouble to send his kimonos for bleaching] but when he considered the labors of those mountain maidens, he wanted the bleaching to be done properly in the country where the maidens had lived. The thought of the white linen, spread out on the deep snow, the cloth and the snow glowing scarlet in the rising sun, was enough*

> *to make him feel that the dirt of the summer had been washed away, even that he himself hand been bleached clean."* (Kawabata & Seidensticker, 2022 [1957/1937], pp. 150-52)

Another literary reference to the "snow made" *Echigo Jōfu* is in Hayashi Mariko's *Kimono o meguru monogatari* (*きものをめぐる物語*, Stories about Kimono), with the short story *Orihimesama* (*織り姫さま*) "The weaving princess", where the feeling of the seasons is also expressed strongly. The fibers and the cold temperatures both interpellate and condition the presence and "*raison d'être*" of Hide, the main weaver described in the story:

> *"The carefully nurtured hemp is cut in the summer and laid in fresh water. Eventually, the skin is peeled off and only the inner fibers are removed and dried. [...] The hemp fibers are separated with fingernails and moistened with the tongue to make fine threads, a process that takes an amazing amount of time. [...] It overall takes three months, as the season shifts from autumn to winter. [...] The threads are brought to the weavers in rounds, from when the snow is knee-deep until the New Year's greetings season. [...] Echigo Jofu hates dryness more than anything else. If it is not woven in the humidity brought by the snow, the fine threads can easily break. Hide's room faces south, close to the entrance. [...] During the winter, [...] it is so cold that if you stay in the room for five minutes, the tips of your fingers and toes get numb. [...] White and cold, it is the kind of room where monks live to meditate."* (Hayashi, 1997, pp. 147-53)

Another prime example can be found with the *yūzen nagashi* (*友禅流し*) or river washing of *yūzen* fabrics, as it used to be practiced in Kyōto by placing the bolt of dyed cloth into the flow of Kamo and Katsura rivers (Figure 2) (Brown, 1994[1]

Figure 2. Kyōto artisans cleansing Yuzen bolts of fabrics (*yūzen nagashi*) (1970's). Photo: courtesy of Ritsumeikan University - ARC (Art Research Center 立命館大学アート・リサーチセンター, 2024)

[1] More precisely: in 1902 (Meiji 35) the river washing was moved from the Horikawa canal the Kamogawa and Katsuragawa. The practice was gradually stopped from the mid-50s (Shōwa 30) and has been completely banned in 1970 (Shōwa 46) due to the pollution brought by the chemical dyes Senshoku Alpha Magazine. (2002). Kūkikan o haramu nung o someru / tekusutgiruwaky no tenkai / Shizenkai no somoku de iomery orimono no inodori 空気感を孕む布を染める/テキスタイルワークの展開/自然界の草木で染める織物の彩り［Dyeing fabrics with air / Development of textile work / Colouring of textiles with natural dyeing material]. *Senshoku Alpha Magazine.*

With the different practices described above, it can thus be said that the kimono, in its very conception, is deeply connected to the qualities brought by the seasons and local specificities. This can serve as a reminder of how important it is to go beyond the discourse of "Japan has four seasons" and interrogate the nationalistic views that can be attached to such curated, repeated image. Japan has many seasonal variations, with different features that differ, from North to South, East to West, from mountains to valleys. Japan is very similar to other countries that also happen to mark their distinctive seasons clearly in their language and dress culture, such as Indonesia and Batik fabrics (Puryanti *et al.*, 2019; Saddhono *et al.*, 2014).

1.2 Kimono's seasonal practice

Besides modes of production, the presence of nature and seasons in kimono culture can be noted in the cyclical changes inherent in the practice of dressing in kimono. The most evident proof of this is seen in the tailoring and the way a kimono can be padded, made with thicker lining or made thinner. For instance, with *awase* (*袷* lined kimono), one can enjoy an outfit that would be appropriate from October until May, accommodating the cool outside temperatures. With *hitoe* (*単衣* unlined kimono) it is the lightness of the fabric that is appreciated, especially during the warm months that spread from June to September. The transition into *yukata* (*浴衣* unlined kimono made of light cotton) or semi-transparent summer kimono made of *ro* (*絽*) or *sha* (*紗*) "breathable" weave, usually happens while the hot and humid days of August linger over the country. The *nagajuban* (*長襦袢*) or underkimono has seasonal variations too, with warm materials such as silk or polyester used from October to May, thinner fabrics such as *ro* or *sha* from June to September, and actually nothing underneath the cotton *yukata*.

This system reinforces how kimono fashion does not rely on changing the shape of the garment nor on having variation in the length of the sleeves. The skirt part is always tailored as a long cylindrical wrap, and it is never shortened either, unlike the modulations seen in Western modes of dress. Put differently, it is just the tailoring, the weaving (and whether there is lining or not) that makes a kimono appropriate for cold or warm months, not the length of fabric covering the body. Personal adjustments — using cords to shorten the skirt part and blouse it around the hips or tuck the sleeves close to the shoulders — to accommodate with certain tasks or movements, are allowed but a kimono will never dramatically have "cuts" in the sleeve or skirt length, as seen in Western shirts, pants or jackets.

On top of this, the feel of the seasons is made obvious with specific "care rituals" such as the seasonal airing out of one's collection of outfits all at once, known as *mushi boshi* (*虫干し*) and the rotation of outfits inside one's wardrobe known as *koromogae* (*衣替え*). The airing is indeed very important, as trapped moisture can lead to mold growth and stains, eventually causing the ruin of the kimono. Overall, having a collection of well cared for kimono to be used alternatively around the year, for several years, can be seen as a highly regarded standard, as suggested by Ariyoshi Sawako in her novel *The River Ki* through the main character of Hana. The point is particularly stressed when Hana prepares the collection of kimono for her daughter Fumio before her wedding:

> *"Hana had not been able to order a dowry as elaborate as her own. Nonetheless, she felt that the least she could do was to order all the kimonos her daughter would ever need for both daily wear and formal occasions. She had several outfits made for each of the four seasons and the would last for the next twenty years, even if Fumio did not look after them properly."* (Ariyoshi, 2004 [1961], p. 146).

These attitudes and considerations were kept alive for generations until the 1950s but have been dying out since then. This is a phenomenon that got to be called *kimono banare* (*着物離れ* separation from kimono) (Valk, 2018, 2021) but still, for some, the kimono continues to be seen as a living asset in one's household. As often highlighted in portraits of kimono wearers, such as the ones interviewed by Sheila Cliffe for her research on kimono communities outside Japan (Cliffe, 2013) as well as the ones photographed by Todd Fong for the Kimono Closet project (Jamieson, 2018)[2] and the kimono can be an integral member of one's life, even when it is just "sleeping in the chest of drawers" (*箪笥に眠る着物 tansu ni nemuru kimono*), it is handled and regularly scrutinized.

In contemporary Japan, it could be argued that it is the world of *chanoyu* (*茶湯*) or tea ceremony — which inherently has a large community of kimono wearers — that perpetuates one of the most intricate way to accent seasonality with kimono. The tea practice calendar is filled with events that follow a specific timeline, such as *Hatsugama* (*初釜*) the first tea after New Year's, *Rikyūki* (*利休忌*) in late March which marks the passing and mourning of tea master Sen no Rikyū, or *Kuchikiri* (*口切*) the changing of brasier, in November. Donning a kimono according to each event is naturally key and numerous books give advices on how to dress in the appropriate kimono for the appropriate "tea season" (Chiba, 2022; Ichida, 2017). Most of these references are, one way or another, accenting the idea that drinking *matcha* tea is touching one of the cores of being Japanese, and the kimono helps expressing as truly or as directly as possible the *kokoro* (*心*) or heart/essence of the tea's spiritual practice. Kitami Masako in particular highlights how the kimono is to be experienced in movement, as a helper for the tea experience:

> *"In tea practice and training, you will actually stand, sit, and perform the temae procedures dressed in kimono. By going through these motions, you can experience the comfort of kimono more than just wearing it. I think it is wonderful to experience Japanese culture, to feel the seasons, and to have such feelings come naturally."* (Kitami, 2018, p. 6)

The practice of tea, as showcased in the above listed books, is therefore presented as a set of actions that enhance, and in the meantime reflect, the importance to perform a guided/curated femininity, inscribed within a vision of Japaneseness embedded in prim and proper actions. Comprised in such circumstances, it can be said that it is a Japaneseness based on harmony with one's surroundings, with the rules and the performativity of doing things correctly, for one's own sake as well as the sake of *omotenashi* (*おもてなし*) hospitality and transmission.

Related to this idea of preserving seasons with traditions, the way Geisha — or *Geiko*, as they are called in Kyōto — and the way the Geisha apprentices — or *Maiko* — dress themselves can be a good example to analyze. Similar to tea practitioners, they always don attires closely related to seasons, from the kimono to the *obi* sash, from the hairdos to the hair accessories. Everything in a Maiko or a Geiko's outfit indeed speak of their appreciation of time passing, although it is not done through a personal nomenclature but rather a social one, displaying the taste of someone who follows and respects the rules, and nodding to the cultural game that the seasons engage people into. As described by Lesley Downer:

> *"For a geisha, the art of choosing and wearing a kimono is as important a part of her training as learning traditional dancing or studying the shamisen. The kimono is an art form in its own right, as subtle and complex as tea ceremony, flower arrangement, or brush painting. […] Traditional arts in Japan are to do not with expressing oneself but learning the form, the kata, the proper way of doing things. The aim is perfection, a perfect promulgation of tradition, the right kimono worn*

[2] For more pictures, see the official Kimono Closet 箪笥開き箪笥開き, T. K. C. (2025). Kimono Closet. Real stories of Japanese women and the kimono they wer. *Facebook Profile (online)*. https://www.facebook.com/thekimonocloset/

> *the right way for the place, the season, and the occasion. [Thus] a geisha naturally chooses a kimono proper to the season. […] More muted colors are suitable for winter, fresher ones for the hot months. There are also traditional color combinations for each month: pale green layered on deep purple for January, rose backed with slate blue for October. The designs of the kimono, whether dyed (as in the dressier garments) or woven in, always reflect the season. [She] selects a kimono with the appropriate flowers, plants, insects, or birds: sprigs of pine in January, plum blossom in February, cherry blossom in the spring, small trout in summer, maple leaves in autumn, and snowflakes in the winter. It is all part of the process of living one's life as art."* (Downer, 2001, pp. 80-179).

On yet another level, one can count on various fashion magazines, such as the chic *Utsukushii kimono* (*美しいキモノ*), to reinforce this tendency with issues regularly dedicated to seasonal coordinates, reformulating years after years the idea that a kimono is at its best when it reflects the season one is experiencing with socially accepted, normalized outfits (Fig. 3).

The comprehensive survey led by Terada Kyoko of the *yukata* presented in *Utsukushii kimono* brings further proof that the magazine is aiming at consistently reminding kimono wearers about the proper image to adopt for each season, namely here the summer season. Spanning from 1954 to 2001, the study also confirms the overwhelming presence of flowers, the majority of which are summer flowers (irises, hydrangea, morning glories, thistle etc.). Surprisingly, *yukata* adorned with flowers connected to other seasons than summer are also present (Terada *et al.*, 2002, p. 59).

Figure 3: Cover of the Fall 2022 issue of Utsukushii Kimono magazine, with an accent on how to "polish" one's chic image this coming autumn with tsumugi and komon kimono. Photo: courtesy of Hearst/Fujingaho publishing group (Hearst. Fujinghao, 2024)

Overall, the recurrent presentation of seasonal kimono via monthly magazines can be understood as a guiding principle, not mandatory but strongly encouraged. Arguably, the magazines might have been invited to create such content by the different kimono dressing schools (*着物着付け教室 kimono kitsuke kyoshitsu*), that hold a certain position of authority (Valk, 2024) and by what people want to see, tying the offer and demand loop together neatly. Put differently, magazines reflect and in the meantime create kimono taste. Brian Moeran in his study of *Katei Gahō* (*家庭画報*) magazine notes:

> *"By depicting 'beautiful nature' Katei Gahō tries to make people think differently about why they need certain things. […] Katei Gahō makes readers realize through its features on fashion, cuisine and interior decor that neither food nor materials in general are what they used to be, and that nature should not merely provide some kind of aesthetic pleasure to be savored by the five senses, but should itself form the kernel of an overall Japanese lifestyle, and hence of readers' very being."* (Moeran, 1995, p. 123)

Eventually, intersecting commercial rhythm and domestic rhythm (Daniels, 2020 [2009]), these different kimono practices consolidate one another, at the same time pertaining to individual and social choices. These practices go from the micro levels (fibers, weaving techniques, ways to collect and care for kimono throughout the years) to the macro levels (mutually recognized ways of layering, tailoring and combining kimono to put it on display). As a result, dressing in kimono is an act that engages people extensively as they not only dress for themselves — accommodating their own personal circumstances — but also dress for others to see — corresponding to social expectations. On both ends of this fashionable "equation", the motifs that are woven/printed/dyed/painted onto the surface of the kimono play a crucial role. Studying them in detail is of importance to understand all the parameters of kimono visual and cultural impact, as discussed below.

Part 2: Seasons and kimono: playing with motifs

In order to complete the survey on the seasonal principles that impact the conception and culture of the kimono, the appeal of coloured motifs and patterns have on kimono enthusiasts has to be noted. Patterns surely help the wearer to express his or her appreciation of the season and they help index the season via visual assertions, the most effective of the communicative tools, as vision is direct, immediate, tangible and eye opening all at the same time. As phrased by Caleb Gattegno:

> *"Sight is swift, comprehensive, simultaneously analytic, and synthetic. It requires so little energy to function, [and] it permits our minds to receive and hold an infinite number of items of information in a fraction of a second. With sight, infinities are given at once, wealth is its description."* (Gattegno, 1969, p. 9)

While the production techniques (notably weaving), tailoring techniques and everyday practices listed above can be understood as the "grammar" of kimono (related to the very "structure" of the garment), motifs can be the kimono's "vocabulary" that reference the seasons with inherent articulation, either perfectly matching the season in terms of timing or foreshadowing it (a fashion choice called *sakidori* (*先取り*)). Furthermore, patterns can be used to create refreshing contrasts, they can be stylized yet realistic, or at times clearly more abstract. To finish, the new tendency of dialing seasons through "artistic kimono" pieces and via imported/Western seasons can be also be added.

2.1 The timeless "classics"

In this category, one of the most iconic is the *sakura* (*桜*) cherry blossoms pattern which is allegedly the most recurrent motif on spring kimono, matching with *hanami* (*花見*) flower viewing, the epitome of spring appreciation. Dressing in kimono to celebrate the coming (and going) of the ever so delicate flowers has been a well observed ritual, as evidenced with *kosode* kimono from the Edo period (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Kosode kimono with spread motifs of Clouds and Cherry Trees (Edo Period). Photo: courtesy of Tōkyō National Museum (ColBase 2024)

In contemporary Japan, *sakura* kimono aligns to *hanami* too, with the added idea of pilgrimage to favorite "touristy" or "Instagram worthy" spots, creating a pocket of time solely dedicated to jolly and more than ever Japanese thoughts. A discourse that is employed by kimono rental shops, repeating the performativity of the spring with kimono, harmonizing everyone, people and flowers alike, in an explosion of pink and off white hues (Figure 5)

Figure 5: Two women in spring kimono enjoying the cherry blossoms. Photo: courtesy of Vasara (rental kimono shop) (Vasara, 2019).

Dressing up in spring colored kimono is evidently a celebration of cheerful and positive feelings. But a more pensive emotion can also come along. A passage from *The Makioka Sisters*, Tanizaki Jun'Ichiro's famous family saga, reflects the more introspective mood that *hanami* can provoke in people. The characters, who are all living in a rather protected, wealthy, "bubbly" world yet still affected by emotional turmoil (Suzuki, 2023, pp. 65-99) are described as all dressed up in beautiful spring kimono, strolling among the blooming trees and letting their thoughts drift away:

> *"Sachiko and Etsuko, turned away from the camera, were looking out over the rippled surface of the lake from under the same cherry tree, and the two rapt figures, mother and daughter, with*

cherry petals fallings on the gay kimono of the little girl, seemed the very incarnation of regret for the passing of spring." (Tanizaki, 1995 [1943], p. 87).

Going back in the history of kimono fashion, the association of spring kimono with *yamabuki* (*山吹*) or Kerria can also be evoked, since they are flowers that mark the coming of spring as surely as cherry blossoms. The beauty and appeal of Kerria can be seen for instance in another Edo period *kosode* (Fig.6 a and b), which resonates with the following poem by Yoshimine no Harutoshi (*良岑玄利*), Priest Sosei's pen name (*素性法師*):

山吹の花色衣ぬしやたれとへどこたへずくちなしにして

Yamabuki no hana iro koromo nushi ya tare toedo kotaezu kuchinashi ni shite

"Will you tell me who the owner is,

of the robe dyed the yellow of blossoming kerria?

I ask but get no answer from this mouthless gardenia." (Kokinshû, Book XIX, poem n. 1012)

Figure 6a and b: Front and back view of a Kosode robe with Snowflakes and Kerria Roses (Edo period). Photo: courtesy of Tōkyō National Museum (ColBase, 2020).

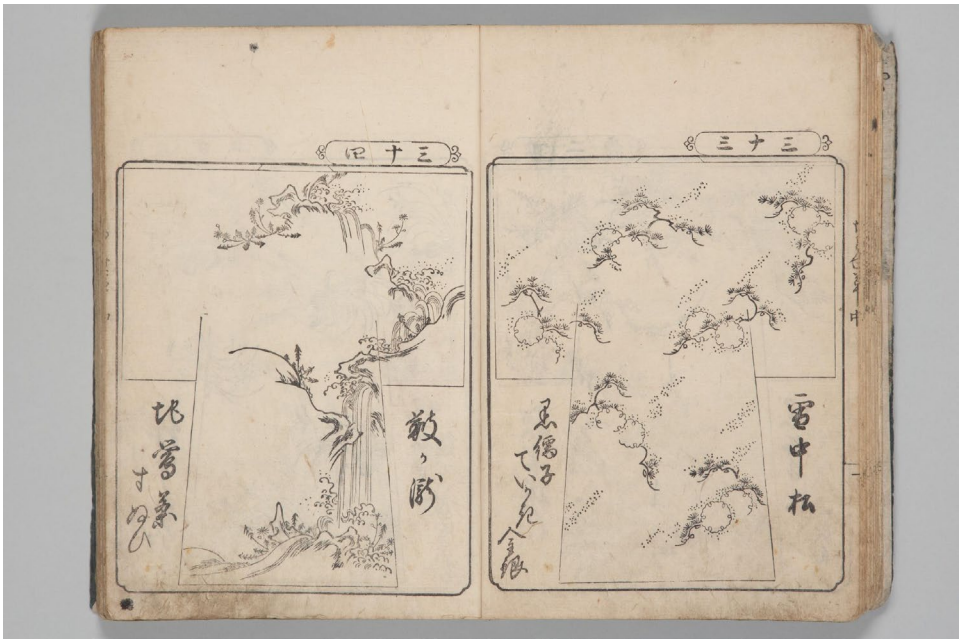

Figure 7: 三文字屋 弥四郎 Sanmonjiya Yashirō ひゐながた千歳草 *Hiinagata Chitosegusa* Design # 33 (1754), right page. Photo: courtesy of the Bunka Gakuen Library - Digital Archive of Rare Materials (Bunka Gakuen Library 2024)

Figure 8a and b: Kimono (front view and close-up) adorned with nandina under snow motif (Taisho era). Photo: courtesy of Obebe to Nyanko rental shop (Antique Kimono Rental Salon) (OBEBETO-NYANKO, 2023)

Continuing in the category of classic motifs, with *yukimochi* (*雪持ち*) or snow laden plant motifs. Naturally, the plants seen in this winter ecology are evergreens, trees or shrubs, such as *matsu* (松 pine tree)(Figure 7), flowering *tsubaki* (*椿* camellia), and

berry bearing *nanten* (*南天* nandina) (Figure 8 a and b), all covered with a thick and fluffy layer of white snow that contrasts with the green, pink and red of each plants. With such pattern, it is the idea of matching the kimono perfectly with winter scenery that can be suggested. On a more metaphorical level, this type of motif bears the idea of persistence and hope that better days are coming soon, hence aiming at the *sakidori* (*先取り*) culture, which is to convey feelings towards a season that hasn't come yet.

Using one's outfit to make a nod to the next "season" is a mark of remarkable sensitivity, an elegant quality one should train their heart for and keep their eyes on. In fact, doing anything against that grain and dressing in hues or motifs that are of the passed / past season would be considered a major "fashion faux-pas". As suggested by lady Sei Shōnagon in her *Pillow Book*: "Depressing things: A red plum-blossom dress in the Third or Fourth Months" (Shonagon & Morris, 1971, p. 40). Her harsh judgment is formulated so that anyone gets reminded that red plum-blossoms hues are good for January or February, when plum trees are indeed in bloom, and anyone dressed as such in March or April would be seen as outdated, hence depressing.

Sakidori linkage can also be studied with unlined summer kimono and *obi*, as they are often adorned with flowers and plants recognized as autumn markers, such as *kikyō* (*桔梗* bell flowers). The kimono below (Fig. 8a and b) showcases said flower while bearing one of the most iconic symbol of summer, *chidori* (*千鳥*) or plover birds, hovering over streams of water.

Figure 9a and b: Summer Kimono with Design of Plovers, Waves, Chinese Bellflowers, Pinks, Pines, Carriages, and Fences. Photo: courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (TheMet, 2024)

Closing the classic motif category with a roundel motif named *yukinowa* (*雪の輪* snowflakes circles). A more radical — if not disorienting in terms of seasonal connection —, motif that is usually found on *yukata* and summer kimono. It may seem counter intuitive at first, but suggesting snowflakes brings a cool feeling to one's body when enduring the blunt of the summer heat. As seen in the following example (Figure 10), *yukinowa* can be big and splashing all over the surface of the kimono and the dark blue color furthers the cool effect.

Figure 10: Yukata with Design of Stylized Snowflakes. Photo: courtesy of Rakuten Fashion (Utatane, 2025).

2.2 Creative approaches: Kimono as art / Kimono in "Western" seasons

Besides the classic formulations of seasons in kimono, a number of designs take a more artistic road, for more creative interpretations of seasons. A prime example are the creations by Kubota Itchiku (久保田一竹, 1917-2003). Displaying an extravagant take on natural phenomena, Itchiku used the kimono surface to express the subtle yet spectacular variations in light, volume, texture of landscapes with intricate tie and dye technique. Approaching the divine, the kimono he designed all seem bigger than reality. They are all tied to spectacular natural imagery, often placing Mount Fuji as a central, eternal figure. In the series titled *Symphony of Light*, the kimono, designed to function as individual canvases that can connect to one another to form a large panoramic view of a dreamt wonderland, all the seasons are present, with all their nuances, such as the micro season when frozen land finally thaws at the end of winter (Figure 11a and b).

The work of Aoki Sue (青木寿恵, born 1926) is also relevant in this category, for instance the piece representing Canadian autumn (Fig.12), rendered with a stunning depiction of a full size mountain landscape. Employing a more radical approach, the works by national treasure Moriguchi Kunihiko (森口邦彦, born 1941) can also be listed. The level of abstraction shows how seasons not only inspire via colours, flowers and plants but also via vibrancy and optical appeal (Fig.13).

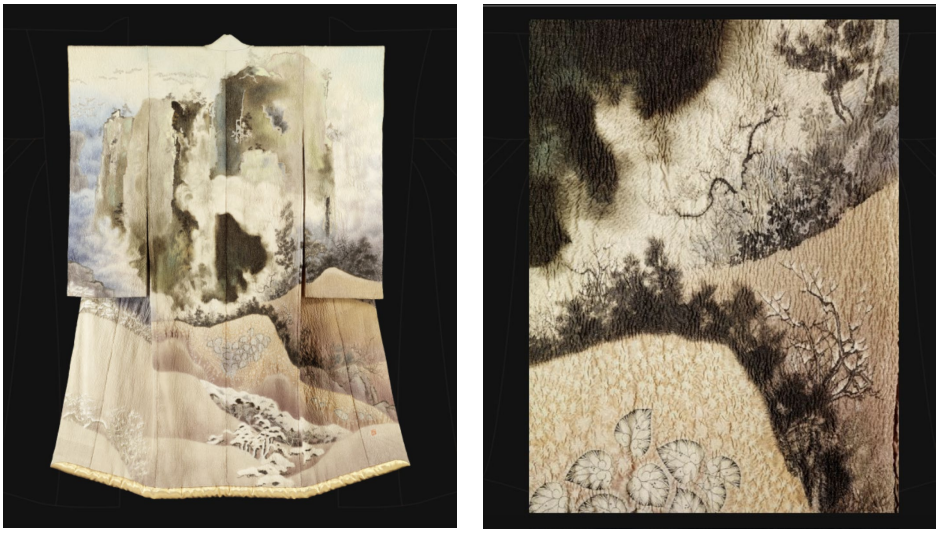

Figure 11a and b: Furisode kimono (full view and detail) by Kubota Itchiku (久保田一竹, 1917-2003) titled The Spring thaw begins [Symphony of light series, No.30]. Photo: courtesy of Kubota Itchiku official website. (The Kubota Collection, 2021)

Figure 12: Aoki Sue (青木寿恵, born 1926) Canadian autumn (カナダの秋, 2018-2019). Photo: courtesy of Aoki Sue official website (Sue Sarasa Museum of Art, 2024)

Figure 13: Moriguchi Kunihiko (森口邦彦, born 1941) The beginning of spring (立春, 2019). Photo: courtesy of Japan Kogei Association (Japan Kogei Association, 2019)

The visual tour of seasonal kimono motifs cannot be complete without the mention of the ones related to "imported" non-Japanese seasonal markers and rites. The first wave of imported seasonal motifs is connected to the adoption of foreign flowers and plants as kimono patterns. As eloquently analysed by Nagasaki Iwao, from the Meiji era (1868-1912) and on, kimono designers came to establish a whole new nomenclature, integrating notably Western roses, "the queen of flowers", in mixed seasonal landscapes that paired them with Japanese flowers, or in compositions using the roses alone (Nagasaki, 2023, pp. 26-9). Tulips, sunflowers and Russian lilies, to signal spring and summer with a new modern touch also became part of the kimono vocabulary during the Meiji era.

The second wave of import would be with the recent inclusion of Halloween and Christmas as cultural practices. Halloween in Japan is a rather adult oriented event, with people in their twenties and thirties enjoying costuming themselves to go to drinking parties. The costumes are often wildly diverse and overlapping with the practice of cosplay. But when it involves kimono, it is interesting to see that it is the "traditional" iconography of Halloween that is being displayed rather than specific stereotypes roles such as "sexy nurse", "freaky zombie" or "spooky pirate". As a result, Halloween kimono outfits play with an array of figures and symbols: night creatures (cats, owls), spider webs, "Hocus Pocus" witch imagery, skeletons or carved pumpkins as well as color combinations (orange/black/purple), having either the whole outfit on full Halloween mode or just small accessories on. A whole new set of possibilities has therefore been opened to kimono enthusiasts, as playfully suggested by Kikuchi Ima, in the illustration she did for the online kimono magazine *Kimonoto* (Fig. 14):

Figure 14: Kikuchi Ima (きくちいま, born 1973) "Kimono Halloween" illustration for the online kimono magazine kimonoto (10/2020). Photo: courtesy of Kimonoto/Kimonoichiba (Kikuchi, 2020)

A similar sense of joy and playfulness can be noted with Christmas kimono or kimono arranged to express Christmasy aesthetic: red/green color combination, Santa Claus figures, Christmas trees, Christmas decorations, or Christmas Wreath (Figure 15).

With designers, shops, magazines and social medias that keep advertising "Western", "Halloween" or "Christmas" branded kimono outfits, it can be noted that exploring not only the regular Japanese seasons but also new, cute, ritual-centered "holiday seasons" has become trendy, and such celebratory occasions appear like renewed invitations to dress in kimono — which contemporary Japanese society tend to lack

nowadays — as well as refreshed takes on design. This makes culture of kimono more visual, more visible, and all the more connected to life with the seasons.

Figure 15: Obi with a Cat Christmas Wreath motif sold by Gofukuyasan. Photo: courtesy of Gofukuyasan website (Gofukuyasan, 2020)

Conclusion

Looking at seasons in kimono is looking at nuances, following the guidance of nature, of culture, conforming to it and at times beautifully, poetically going against the established expectations. It is embracing not only regulated modes, curated imagery and degrees of Japaneseness but also the diverse array of tiny moments that mark the year and playfully rearrange national, regional and / or personal narratives.

On another level, studying seasons in kimono/kimono seasons brings the issue of how clothing practices are learned and transmitted. Seeing the seasons discussed and exposed in magazines, texts, commercials, reflected in novels, poems and oral traditions creates a virtuous circle of collegial understandings and dialogs. However, this should not negate the fact that such attitude can implement a negative push to buy kimono in a reified, shallow manner. As stated by Moeran and Skov: "In contemporary Japan, changes of the seasons are related to cycles of consumption, and certain images — like those of mount Fuji and cherry blossoms — are used as a means of persuading people to buy things" (Moeran & Skov, 1997, p. 189). As noted by Sheila Cliffe, the kimono seasonal connection can also be an obstacle, prompting self censorship for some people, while being a source of incredible inspiration for others (Cliffe, 2017, p. 195).

Ultimately, understanding the gesture that is seeing and reading the seasons in / with kimono is to realize that kimono is in a spectrum and to be appreciated fully, it has to remain dynamic and malleable like a visual language. By celebrating its multiple formats, from classic to new references, the kimono fashion and culture will keep its systems and territories alive.

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She is particularly interested in the intersection of dress and dressing, clothing and embodiment, currently developing projects on how kimono is practiced in festivals and in real life (Maiko and Geiko communities as well as tourists renting kimono in Kyōto) and how it is elaborated in works of poetry and fiction (specifically Yosano Akiko, Tanizaki Jun'ichirō, Ariyoshi Sawako and Hayashi Mariko).

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RESEARCH PAPER

Subversive imagology of the ecoscape: an ecocritical analysis of Ibuse Masuji's Kakitsubata (1951) and Taguchi Randy's Zōn ni te (2013)

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Abstract: The relationship between Japanese people and nature is one of a strong bond in several respects. On the one hand, the symbiotic relationship between the Japanese and Japan's natural environment has shaped cultural aspects of the philosophical and religious matrix, such as the *Shintō* and Buddhist rituals. On the other hand, the unpredictable character of nature manifests in earthquakes, tsunamis, and floods that have characterized the country for centuries. Eventually, in the global imagination, Japan is associated with cherry blossoms or autumn foliage, expressing an aesthetics of life's fragility in its fleeting passage. This image metaphorically describes nature as both friendly and hostile. What happens when this image is subverted by anthropogenic interference that corrupts the ecosystem and its connection with human beings? Radioactive contamination has troubled Japan twice. First, the double atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki annihilated the topography of the two cities. More recently, the nuclear accident at Fukushima Daiichi turned a flourishing agricultural region into a graveyard of radioactive waste. Nevertheless, literature gives us evidence of nature fighting back. In *Kakitsubata* (1951), Ibuse Masuji portrays a crazy iris, blooming out of season. With *Zōn ni te* (2013), Taguchi Randy presents a revitalized nature, more thriving than ever, despite the soil contamination surrounding the nuclear power plant. This contribution adopts an ecocritical perspective to analyze an alternative view of the Japanese seasonal imagery depicted in literature. The aim is to investigate how the imagology that associates Japan with a sublime, untouched country (*jitsuzō*) is far from the truth of a contaminated environment (*jittai*) which struggles to restore its unspoiled sublimity.

Keywords: *Satoyama; Ecoscape; Catastrophe, Ecocriticism; Contemporary Japanese Literature; Atomic Bombing; Nuclear Accident*

Introduction

The relationship between Japanese people and nature is a strong bond in several respects. In Japan, human activities and social practices such as religious, aesthetic, and ideological praxis of everyday life are naturally inscribed in the cycle of the four seasons resulting in a highly encoded representation of nature (Shirane, 2013, p. XII). According to Shirane, the Japanese's deep sensitivity towards the environment and seasonal changing has been influenced by the country's particular agricultural heritage, climate and geography (2013, p. XII) was recently as been defined as 'ecoscape'.

This long-standing and close affinity with nature has been grasped as an exotic element abroad. In the global imagination, Japan is associated with *hanami* 花御 (cherry blossoms) or *momijigari* 紅葉狩り (autumn foliage), expressing in an aesthetic image the fragility of life in its fleeting passage. These images evoke the Japanese aesthetic of *mono no aware* もの哀れ, demanding awareness for the ephemeral quality of life:

> *Haga sees one of the unique features of the Japanese people (nation) as their love and respects for nature, which, he believes, distinguishes them from Westerners, who lack this attitude and who fight with and attempt to conquer nature* (2013, p. 6).

The relationship between man and nature, so often represented in traditional Japanese rituals and arts, was observed with admiration and imported to the West as the country's cultural icon. This exotic imagery served as a source of fascination for European literati and merchants of the 18-19th centuries so much that they enhanced an artistic current, that of *Japonisme*, capable of seducing, among others, Van Gogh and Degas.

About a century later, this process of representing otherness through more or less stereotyped images found critical interest and gave birth to the critical approach known as 'imagology'. The target of criticism was no more the figurative arts but the literary product as a descriptive source of those images of alterity.

Eventually, the iconic description of *hanami and momijigari* represents an example of Japanese aesthetic imagery retrieved in seasonal changing that metaphorically describes nature as friendly and hostile. The reference to death and rebirth that those two seasonal rituals implicitly implied tend to hide the unpredictable character of nature manifested in earthquakes, tsunamis, and floods that have repeatedly overwhelmed the country for centuries. Natural disasters are underrepresented in visual art since they are considered not normative, although familiar environmental or climatic manifestations. Asquith and Kalland argued:

> *(..) the nature cherished by most Japanese is not nature in its original state but in its idealized state* (quoted in Wake et al., 2018, p. 4).

What happens when this image of seasonal change in Japan is subverted by anthropogenic interference that corrupts the ecosystem and its symbiotical living with human beings? Through the analysis of Ibuse Masuji and Taguchi Randy's selected works, this study aims at underlining not-normative perceptions of seasonal change in Japan, thus producing self-images which testify to the corruption of the environment and the human/nature bonds as well. On the one hand, the iris which blooms out of season in Ibuse's *Kakitsubata* (1951) probes the irrationality of technological advancement that led to the atomic annihilation; that irrationality is mirrored by the unnatural blooming of the iris. On the other hand, Taguchi Randy's *Zōn ni te* (2013) portrays the revenge of nature that flourishes undisturbedly after the evacuation of the surrounding area of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant. The research aim is to investigate how the (subversive) imagology emerging from the description of an abnormal seasonal change alters Japanese aesthetics associated with natural phenomena and its representation in literature.

The research approach is then twofold: ecocriticism sheds light on the symbiotic relationship between Japanese cultural tradition, nature and seasonal changing. This approach becomes crucial when dealing with apocalyptic scenarios such as the atomic annihilation and the nuclear catastrophe at the core of the testimonial narratives here analysed since "apocalypticism both responds to and produces 'crisis'" thus enabling "our evaluation of it as an ecocritical trope" (Greg, 2012, p. 94). At the same time, a psychopathological perspective related to the radioactive discourse soon after Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bombings and Fukushima Daiichi nuclear fallout highlights the cost of invisible contamination responsible for the corruption of the environment as well as the rupture of human relationship with natural elements.

After discussing the notions of (subversive) imagology and ecoscape, this study will turn its attention to the analysis of Ibuse Masuji's *Kakitsubata* and Taguchi Randy's *Zōn ni te* to verify how testimonial narratives about radioactive contamination may be successful in overturning the self-image of the harmonious Japanese ecoscape. In doing so, the article moves a step forward in the imagology study, considering how corrupted self-images are the result of the anthropogenic degradation they denounce.

(Subversive) Imagology of *Satoyama*

Imagology (literally: 'image studies', from the French *imagologie*) gained popularity in France during the Fifties thanks to the Belgian scholar Hugo Dyserinck who coined the term to identify a comparative approach to investigating intercultural relations regarding mutual perceptions, images, and self-images. It consists of an interdisciplinary viewpoint that aims to underline the artistic representation of cultural traits, thus involving anthropological and cultural dimensions (habits and customs, religious practices). For this reason, imagology refers to the field of comparative literature.

With the demand for a definition of World Literature, the imagology perspective was implemented as an interpretative paradigm of a multicultural reality based on exchanges, connections, mutual influences and reception rules, thus promoting the passage to a global (transnational) literary production.

As Soulas-de Russel stated, the imagology "allows us to clearly isolate the stereotypes conveyed, spread more or less consciously by the texts of all literature" (Soulas-de Russel, 2016, p. 3).[3] In other words, the imagology enables the analysis of cultural image of the alterity enhancing the act of recognising self and other's identity.

Sometimes, such images are self-produced and acquire a double semantic value. On one hand, they nurture a particular aesthetic or socio-political vision of national identity; in this sense, the image is subdued to political powers. On the other hand, self-image may be the conscious choice of artistic production to respond the requests and tastes of the foreign public; in this case, the image is overwhelmed by marketing rules. In any case, they are "self-images based on the principle of national and cultural belonging", which involves a process of (self) identification of the subject/community "sometimes starting from hetero-images" (Proietti, 2008, p. 117). Proietti specifies,

> *Literary 'self-images' would, therefore, be denotative of the mental processes to which humans appeal when referring to concepts such as 'homeland' or 'nation,' through which they satisfy their desire to belong and to affirm their identity* (2008, pp. 117-18).

That is why adopting an imagological perspective implies a deep knowledge of the ethnic milieu of reference. Moreover, when national images are distorted, we speak, in the imagological field, of "mirages" (2008, p. 108).

As an interpretive model, imagology advocates overcoming fixed cultural categories and grids stemming from culture-specific traits often devalued or criticized as stereotypes and cliches. For the risks of misinterpreting literary representations of individuals and society with an authorial bias towards writing, the reliability of imagology as an approach to literary criticism is still debated.

Since this study intends to adopt the perspective of imagology studies to investigate the traditional relationship between humans and nature in Japan as represented in two post-disaster testimonial narratives, the ecocritical approach also becomes essential. In this sense, it is necessary to start with a definition of ecoscape, which, in Japan, finds its closest correspondence with the concept of *satoyama*.

According to an urban ecology perspective, the term 'ecoscape' refers to the complex interplay between human and non-human factors in a built environment (Rhine, 2018, p. 23). The ecoscaping practice aims at maintaining the ecological balance of the environment by minimally impacting its biodiversity while intervening with sustainable architectures and infrastructures for human needs. For these reasons, this definition of ecoscape finds an example in the Japanese ecosystem known as *satoyama* 里山 (literally: village surrounded by mountains), a paradigm that, according to Shirane, roots back in the mid-to-late Heian period (Shirane, 2013, p. 13). Different from the *yamazato* 山

[3] "It allows us to clearly isolate the stereotypes conveyed and spread by the texts of all literature, more or less consciously". (Translation by the author)

里, the romanticised mountain village of *waka* and court literature, the S*atoyama* is strongly connected with agricultural activities and the seasonal changing (Shirane, 2013, p. 17):

> *A major characteristic of Satoyama landscape, with its farm village near a river at the base of a mountain, was the belief that gods resides in different aspects of nature and that birds and animals served as intermediaries between this world and the other world of gods and the dea, which existed in and beyond the mountain* (ibid. 2013, p. 21).

According to the author, this is the source for the widespread custom of cherry-blossom viewing and the interest in the *meisho* *名所* (literally: 'famous places' Shirane, 2013, p. 23). *Satoyama* promotes and maintains biodiversity and sustainable living for the village community. 40% of Japanese land can be described as *satoyama*, or its variant *satoumi* *里海* in the case the village is located near the sea (Yuki, 2018, p. 131). This is why it becomes a source to interpret the anthropogenic intervention that disrupts this hypothetically ideal ecosystem and to investigate its enviro-socio-political issues.

The study now turns its attention to analyzing the two proposed works according to the comparative approach of imagology studies. The purpose is to highlight how both testimonial narratives portray an ecoscape devastated by nuclear contamination, thus emphasizing the rupture between the now corrupted *satoyama* and its ideal, aesthetic representation. In doing so, the investigation also strengthens the the role of psychological trauma in dealing with that environmental degradation.

Ibuse Masuji and *Kakitsubata*

As a writer, Ibuse Masuji received several awards, including the Noma Prize (for *Black Rain*) and the Order of Cultural Merit in 1966. The author became internationally known in the Sixties for his *Kuroi ame* 『*黒い雨*』("Black Rain", 1965), then transposed into an award-winning film by Imamura Shōhei in 1989. The story is a fictional account of a family that survived Hiroshima. However, the narrator takes advantage of the actual diary by the *hibakusha* *被爆者* (a-bomb survivor) Shigematsu Shizuma to denounce discrimination towards the victims of the atomic bombing and their struggle to re-establishing everyday life after the atomic-bombing experience. The novel presents a common topos in the *genbaku bungaku*「*原爆文学*」(literature of the atomic bomb) as to say the discrimination towards the survivors. The protagonist, Yasuko, is rejected by her future husband, concerned about her exposure to the black rain that followed the drop of the Little Boy bomb in Hiroshima.

Eventually, long before the international success of *Kuroi ame*, the author committed to the same theme with *Kakitsubata*『*かきつばた*』(The Crazy Iris), first published in the literary review *Chūōkōron* 『*中央公論*』in 1951.

The novel opens as follows:

> *Shortly after Hiroshima was bombed, I was at friend's house in the outskirts of Fukuyama looking at an iris which had flowered out of season. It grew alone and its blossoms were purple. This was in the middle of August, some days after the Imperial Rescript of Surrender* (Ibuse, 1984, p. 17).

The plot is set in Fukuyama, about 100 km from Hiroshima, and a flashback returns the narration on 6 August 1945. The short story lasts only twenty pages and seems to subvert logical rules: American leaflets and handbills dropped from the sky warn citizens to evacuate to Hiroshima, considered a safer city than Fukuyama; everything but the food is very cheap in the shops.

Only thirty or forty hours after the atomic event, the protagonist - a male voice from Tōkyō - hears about the Hiroshima nuclear blast. The first survivors took refuge in Fukuyama, reporting the new weapon and the strange injuries it provoked. Following

Emperor Hirohito's surrender speech on the radio - the so-called *gyokuon-hōsō* 玉音放送 broadcasted on 15 August - many citizens complained of stomach-ache and other psychosomatic symptoms. The protagonist decides to return to the capital, and while at a friend's house at Fukuyama's outskirts, they discover a corpse in the pond one morning. The circularity of the narration concludes the short story with the image of a half-crazy, drowned girl who had experienced the Hiroshima atomic bombing with her family. The irises are all clustered at one end of the pond, and one flower is in bloom:

> *At the mouth of the gulley was clustered the main group of irises; a few feet away grew the angular leaves from whose recess emerged the twisted stem with its belated purple flowers. The petals looked hard and crinkly […]*
>
> *"Do you think they were frightened into bloom?" I said.*
>
> *"It's extraordinary," said Kiuchi. "I've never heard of an iris flowering this late. It must have gone crazy! […] The iris blooming is crazy and it belongs to a crazy age."* (Ibuse, 1984, pp. 34-35)

The mention to the "crazy age" refers to the atomic age. The promise of prosperity, a direct result of technological advancement, is disillusioned by the brutality of the atomic event that is perpetuated not once but twice. It is the defeat of humanity as long as it highlights the limits of human intellect submitted to a process of self-destruction. According to Treat, the displacement of the entire story to Fukuyama and its outskirts enables the author to give "considerable thought to the problems of representing, accurately and ethically, an atrocity which one is guiltily spared" (Treat, 1995, p. 279).

In *Kakitsubata*, the atomic bomb, whose explosion is usually associated with the image of a mushroom cloud, overlaps with an iris in full bloom. A subversive representation is put in place in the short story, overturning the *mono no aware* usually linked to awakening of nature and now related to death.

There is also another level of interpretation of the crazy iris that refers to the *hanakotoba* 花言葉 - the symbolic language of flowers: iris stands for strength and vitality. It is considered protection from typhoons and storms, especially in the Japanese countryside. All extended discourse on the iris is, *imagologically* speaking, a reference to force and resilience. Eventually, in portraying an iris which booms out of season, the story counterbalances the oxymoron between the vigour of the iris and the weakness of the *hibakusha*.

Moreover, the *hanakotoba* comes into play a second time in the figure of the suddenly insane young woman who finds death by drowning in the pond at the family of the protagonist's friend. Women are usually referred to as *hana* 花 - flowers - in Japanese poetic language. The image of the girl overlaps with that of the iris again, but this time both are crazy (unnatural) in the sense that her dead body is not as full of life as it should be, while the iris, supposedly hibernating in that season, triumphs in colour. The narrative questions the implementation of nuclear power: the young woman would not have committed suicide if the atomic bombing had not been released (Natsume, 1995, p. 27); at the same time, her suicide foreshadows a possible suicide (annihilation) of all humanity, which the atomic weapon has made possible (Natsume, 1995, p. 33).

Similarly, in *Kuroi ame*, in which rain, as to say, water - synonymous with life - was dyed black, indicative of its corruption in the form of radioactive and therefore deadly contamination.

These examples portray a not normative representation of 'self-image' (of water, iris, woman) that imagology reads as subversive because corrupted by the radioactivity contamination of the environment, thus predicting death due to the *genbakushō* 原爆症 (radiation sickness) in the immediate aftermath of the bombing. Moreover, radioactivity is also a prerequisite for discrimination and social rejection. In this sense, the writing inquiries the "nuclear morality" (Sato, 1995, p. 2) of technological advancement.

Several years after the publication of *Kakitsubata*, Ibuse insists on the subversive value acquired by certain familiar and common natural elements, repurposed in a non-normative key due to anthropogenic human intervention. The analysis of this imagological subversion restores centrality to the degeneration of nature as expressed by the author in an exercise of self-representation (self-image) sharply at odds with the usual and established semantic value: "The return of figure disfigures the disfiguration of concepts by reinscribing the imago in the midst of the logos" (Shiota, 2017).

Decades after the double atomic bombings, Japan experienced the three-fold catastrophe of the Tōhoku in 2011, bringing to light ancient fears of the misuse of nuclear energy due to the mismanagement at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant. The following paragraph analyzes a short story describing the environmental changes around the plant contaminated by the radioactive fallout. The imagology studies are a key research tool that highlights *satoyama*'s transformation and reception in the testimonial narrative.

Taguchi Randy and *Zōn ni te*

Taguchi Randy is a contemporary Japanese writer whose popularity has overcome Japanese national boundary to reach a broader audience, thanks also to her engagement in the social media. Several novels have been transposed into movies, starting from *Sora no ana* 『空の花』("Hole in the Sky") by Kazuyoshi Kumakiri (2001) and the world-wide popular *Konsento* 『コンセント』("Outlet", 2000) by Shun Nakahara (2001) and *Antena* 『アンテナ』("Antenna", 2001) by Kazuyoshi Kumakiri again (2003). These last two novels are part of a trilogy - together with *Mozaiku* 『モザイク』("Mosaic", 2001).

Zōn ni te 『ゾーンにて』was published in the review *Ouru yomimono*『御売る読み物』in November 2011 and then included in the homonymous anthology in 2013 (Schmiedel, 2021, p. 350). The short story focuses on the meeting of the writer Hatori Yōko with Kudō Ken'ichi, a man in his fifties who evacuated the area surrounding the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant. For the record, the second chapter of the collection entitled *Umibe ni te*『海辺にて』("On the seashore") features what critics consider the second part of the story, published for the first time in January 2012 (Slaymaker, 2020, p. 484).

Ken'ichi is an evacuee who returns home once or twice a month to care for his fold. On this occasion, he usually drives people interested in approaching the off-limit zone of Fukushima Daiichi.

On their road trip among the ghost towns of Minamisoma and Ōkuma, Yōko gains awareness of the implications radioactivity has had for the ecoscape (Schmiedel, 2021, p. 351). The small ghost towns near the Fukushima Daiichi power plants responded to this definition before the nuclear crisis compromised that delicate balance. In Japanese, these towns could be described as an example of *satoyama* before radioactive contamination disrupted their integrity. Yōko and Ken'ichi occasionally stop at farms, but the area has transformed into open-air graveyards for animals: "My heart beat fast to the words 'into the zone'. We're going into the zone now, and it's like a SF movie" (Taguchi, 2016, p. 29).

The estrangement feeling perceived by Yōko stems from the consciousness that the nuclear accident had transformed Fukushima "from a satoyama utopia to a nuclear dystopia" (Yuki, 2013, p. 58). Before 11 March 2011, Fukushima symbolized technological advancement and economic prosperity. The nuclear accident destroyed the stereotype of Japan as a country of coexistence and symbiotic equilibrium between the ecosystem and humanity. The *satoyama* - as to say, the untouched woodland surrounding the populated area of Fukushima - turned into a corrupted environment due to radioactivity contamination of air and soil:

> *Prior to the nuclear accident and radioactive contamination, Fukushima had long been famous for its production of high-quality rice, meat, vegetables, and fruit. In fact, the prefecture of Fukushima was, and still is, eager to tout its region as Satoyama [emphasis mine], publicizing it is a good destination for tourists* (2013, p. 57).

The tourist popularity of *Satoyama* is questioned after the nuclear fallout. The agricultural and dairy products of that land were no more commercialised on the domestic markets. Moreover, the dispersion of radioactivity substances in the air and the water of the Pacific Ocean after the nuclear accident turn the nuclear catastrophe into a global concern, thus changing the image of Japan forever. No more a safe country, a symbol of equilibrium between tradition and progress, but an unstable nation incapable of tackling the crisis.

A new geo-cultural space took over the *satoyama*: the off-limit zone. This evacuation area is also a liminal, transitional boundary, a limbo between life and death characterised by ambiguity[4]. Yōko comments: "Here is a sort of halfway to the world of the dead. A suspended place, it is somehow nostalgic" (Taguchi, 2016, p. 65). The mention of the zone's ambivalence is interesting since uncertainty is one of the characteristics of environmental contaminants. In Fukushima's case, the radioactivity released into the atmosphere and the radioactive waste disposal became a crucial concern, contributing to the corruption of *satoyama*'s equilibrium.

According to Veyner, the uncertain character of any contamination finds expression in three main factors: 1) exposure uncertainty, 2) etiological uncertainty, and 3) diagnostic uncertainty (1988, p. 59). The so-called 'exposure uncertainty' forces Yōko to check the Geiger counter repeatedly during her trip in the off-limit zone. It is also the main source for radiophobia, as to say, the 'radiation anxiety' which permeates the testimonial accounts soon after the nuclear fallout. It implies psychopathological sequelae often associated with PTSD symptoms, even on a psychosomatic level (De Pieri, 2021).

The 'etiological uncertainty' refers to the unfeasibility of recognizing the origins of possible radiation symptoms since the ARS, the acronym for 'acute radioactive syndrome', may manifest with signs of fatigue or uneasiness whose etiopathogenesis is of difficult determination. Last but not least, the 'diagnostic uncertainty' underlines the arduous prediction of the prognosis, which is generally reserved. Vyner adds the 'boundary uncertainty' to this list: "When a governmental institution declares that within a certain boundary, conditions are dangerous; but beyond that boundary, conditions are safe" (Vyner, 1988, p. 59). In Yōko's words: "At the end of this street, there's the hazard area. Here is the provisional area for evacuation emergence. That is the no-trespassing area. Here is the real world" (Taguchi, 2016, p. 66). The author herself considered the zone as "an indeterminate, mysterious place" (Taguchi quoted in Yuki, 2015, p. 93). Hence, an overlapping of the female figures is at stake in the story: Yōko has written a novel about radioactivity as well, and both Yōko and Taguchi demonstrated a complicated relationship to radiation and reporting (Slaymaker, 2020, p. 484).

In *Zōn ni te* traditional imagery of the Japanese landscape is subdued to double upheavals. First, Taguchi portrays a subversive image of Fukushima's *satoyama*: the off-limit area is a no-man land where the surviving cattle and pets are dying slowly and painfully. At the same time, the writer re-establishes the traditional image of an untouched ecoscape by staging the natural revenge in the form of flourishing grass, which overwhelms the evacuated zone.

Moreover, even the promotional representation of nuclear energy - known as the 'safety myth' - underwent a radical derangement. Before 11 March, Japanese people were convinced of the safeness of nuclear energy: the self-image representing the 'peaceful atom' was subverted and dismantled by the triple catastrophe of the Tōhoku disaster. Nature revindicated its power, first by earthquake and tsunamis, last in the

[4] *chūzuri ni natta basho* 宙づりになった場所 (Taguchi, 2016, p. 65).

guise of plutonium-239 and uranium-235. These fossil materials fill the air, infiltrate the soil and settle on every object, causing their death or corruption. Only grass seems to have made a deal with the evil - the radioactivity - and it is flourishing to the point of taking possession of streets, houses, and human belongings: "I couldn't see anything ahead because luxurious vegetation was covering both sides of the narrow street" (Taguchi, 2016, p. 45), commented Yōko, the female protagonist. And again, similar expressions recur several times in the story:

> *A single street continued in the middle of the overgrown fields, or maybe it was a paddy field. It was so desolate I couldn't distinguish between a vegetable plot and a paddy field. With the disappearance of humans, it was vegetation that dominated the land. In the zone, the green seems sinister* (Taguchi, 2016, p. 63).

That prosperous vegetation reflects an ominous feeling in that its growth is exaggerated and abnormal, thus fomenting the idea that radioactivity has taken possession of it to the point of turning the greenery insane. Hence, again, spring and its awakening, rather than being associated with life, becomes a memento mori of the threatening presence of the invisible, untouchable, unnoticeable radioactivity in the area, suggesting a subversive imagology reading.

Conclusion: an Imagology Comparison

Through the perspective of imagology this study provided a critical reading of Ibuse Masuji's *Kakitsubata* and Taguchi Randy's *Zōn ni te* taking into consideration the subversive representation that both novels stage of the seasonal change or the traditional Japanese ecoscape.

At a domestic level, high value is placed by Japanese people on gentleness and harmony, which find performance in an idealised vision of nature (Shirane, 2013, p. 8). This research investigated the implications of representing a no more romanticised image of the natural environment, altered by anthropogenic manipulation. The assumption was that reality is reflected, replicated, or deformed by its representation, that is, by the literary image: "Images are not merely the object of study but are also the medium of thought, action and communication" (Shiota, 2017).

The ambiguity of the image is described by the continuous oscillation between signifying and figuring, between *mimesis* and *poiesis,* two poles with complementary functions. Thus, the image consists of a polysemic moment of dialogical reflection of self and others that risks falling into cliches and prejudices because of pre-constituted interpretations. Proietti considers it a "sensible presentation, comparison, metaphor" (Proietti, 2008, p. 41). *Imagotypical* structures arise from conventional and rigid models, stratified over time and shared by the typical mentality of society, and therefore image may assume connotations which are very similar to the stereotype (Proietti, 2008, p. 109).

Both the atomic bombings and Fukushima nuclear accident had a huge figurative impact on cultural practices, and they were often associated with the representation of a dystopian future. Human harm to the environment and other species to restore peace or fulfil well-being reveals the ultimate risk of preventing survival and facilitating the annihilation of living creatures instead (Haga, 2019, p. XVI).

Radioactivity contamination, as an "eco-pathological threat" (Greg, 2012, p. 105), is a crucial trope in Japanese ecocriticism, especially after the Fukushima nuclear accident. Ecocriticism, as an approach to literary criticism, not only helps restore the relationship between humans and the ecosystem but also warns about the disruptive effects of human activities (Shiota, 2017). According to Thornber:

> *…there is a resounding contradiction in east Asian aesthetic representation of 'harmonious human-nonhuman relationship' in that they do not reflect empirical reality and thereby fail to address its 'eco degradation'* (Thornber, 2012, pp. 5-6)

Although radioactivity represents an ecological as well as psychopathological threat at the core of both short stories, both literary works give relevance to earth's agency, performed in the revitalizing power of the flourishing nature. After underlining the stereotypical imagery that characterizes Japan's relationship with seasonal change and the natural environment, the research proves how these images were abruptly corrupted by anthropogenic interference: the atomic bombing and the nuclear fallout. To face these "*envirotechnical* disaster"[s] (Deichert, 2021, p. 77), an aesthetic representation of post-disaster landscapes was performed through art and literary works aiming at domesticating and acknowledging the uncertainty of radioactivity contamination. The result was artistic compromises beyond human beings, involving environmental as well as geological forces, radioactivity, animals and inanimate but contaminated objects (Deichert, 2021, p. 79).

Eventually, by regaining its predominance in the ecoscape - as *Kakitsubata* and *Zōn ni te* suggest - nature brings the discourse back to a level that is no longer anthropocentric, but ecocentric, and it is an anthropogenic intervention that has necessitated this shift in perspective: 'For imagologists, textuality emerges in force fields that disrupt traditional (Shiota, 2017). While Ibuse's *Kakitsubata* blooms out of season, thus confirming that natural power was abruptly corrupted by radiation, Taguchi's flourishing greenery blooms at the right times. It restores the ordinary flow giving room to an optimistic vision of the future. Moreover, Ibuse's production on the atomic bombings insists on the crucial role the revival of everyday routine and rituals assumes in the wake of catastrophe: as the season changes, even human beings can find resilient skills to cope with traumatic experiences and loss (Natsume, 1995, p. 28).

Beginning with idyllic imagery that equates the Japanese with the exemplary ecoscape (*jitsuzō* 実像), these novels report a different, seriously compromised reality (*jittai* 実体). However, the natural element seems to prevail over the anthropogenic one, encouraging resiliency: nature preserves its regenerative force and struggles to restore its unspoiled sublimity.

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Sonic Seasons: Musical Representation of Nature in Tōru Takemitsu's Film Music

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Abstract: Japanese seasonal culture, rooted in natural environment and artistic traditions, permeates daily life and art forms, including the film music of Tōru Takemitsu (1930–1996). A nature enthusiast, Takemitsu themed nearly half of his works—including his nearly 100 film scores—around seasonal imagery. Seasonal elements in his film music extend beyond titles and scenes to metaphoric narrative functions. This paper analyses how seasonal culture shapes Takemitsu's compositional techniques (texture, harmony, timbre, orchestration) and his use of music to depict seasons on screen. Focusing on four films—*A Song of Early Spring* (1969), *Dear Summer Sister* (1972), *Glowing Autumn* (1973), and *Winter* (1972)—it applies film music theory and Japanese seasonal aesthetics, with detailed analysis of "Dear Summer Sister". The study reveals Takemitsu's unique integration of seasonal symbolism into cinematic storytelling.

Keywords: *Tōru Takemitsu; Film Music; Seasonal Elements; Music Image; Japanese Movie; Music Analysis*

1. Tōru Takemitsu

Tōru Takemitsu (1930-1996) was Japan's preeminent 20th century composer, achieving global recognition in contemporary classical music (Burt, 2001, p. 3). His prolific output spanned orchestral works, chamber music, and over 100 film scores, alongside philosophical writings on cross-cultural aesthetics (Koh, 1998)(Koizumi, 2008). This interdisciplinary legacy—synthesizing Japanese tradition with Western modernism—offers rich research potential through both his compositions and theoretical works.

1.1. The Creation of Film Music

Tōru Takemitsu's film music career (1952–1995) spanned 105 scores—nearly one-third of his oeuvre—demonstrating his enduring commitment to the medium (Deguchi, 2019, p.312 (Deguchi, 2019, p. 312). His formative years (1952–1961) were marked by Western imitation, notably under the mentorship of Fumio Hayasaka, whose synthesis of Japanese *pentatonicism* and European modernism profoundly shaped Takemitsu's early style (Koizumi, 2008, p. 45). This period yielded eclectic works like *Hokusai* (1953), blending jazz, Latin, and electronic elements.

The 1962–1977 "golden stage" saw Takemitsu's mature synthesis of East-West aesthetics, producing 61 film scores including *Ran* (1985)—his internationally acclaimed collaboration with Kurosawa (Calabretto, 2010, p. 89). Japan's postwar economic boom facilitated this output, while Takemitsu's rediscovery of traditional gagaku and seasonal symbolism refined his musical language (Koozin, 2010, p. 72)(Lie, 2011, p. 147).

During 1978–1984, industrial decline prompted deeper reflection. Takemitsu's scores for films like *Woman in the Dunes* (1964) prioritized "musical essence", merging *ma* (Japanese temporal space) with Debussian harmony (Deguchi, 2019, p. 318). His final period (1985–1995) embraced paradox: "the more national, the more universal"

(Takemitsu *et al.*, 1995). Works like *Black Rain* (1989) distilled timbral purity through conventional instruments, transcending East-West binaries (Koizumi, 2008, p. 201).

1.2 East Meets West

From Takemitsu's compositional evolution reflects a deliberate trajectory from Western influence to a synthesized East-West aesthetic. His early works (1950s) exhibited strong Western tendencies, particularly through the lens of French Impressionism. Composers like Debussy (notably his use of whole-tone scales and nature-inspired works such as *La mer*), Messiaen (modal systems and birdsong techniques), and Satie (conceptual minimalism) profoundly shaped Takemitsu's harmonic language and timbral sensitivity (Koizumi, 2008, p. 89)(Koozin, 1993, p. 62). This Impressionist foundation aligned with his innate attraction to natural imagery, evident in his lifelong emphasis on sonic "painting" through texture and colour (Xing, 2008, p. 41).

A pivotal shift occurred in 1962 when John Cage visited Japan, introducing his philosophy of indeterminacy and nature-derived silence (Deguchi, 2019, p. 304). Cage's influence—particularly concepts from *4'33"* (1952) and his Zen-inspired rejection of compositional dogma—prompted Takemitsu to reconsider Japanese traditional music beyond Western frameworks. As Takemitsu noted: "Cage taught me not how to listen, but how to hear" (Zhang, 2022, p. 20). This catalysed his deeper engagement with ma (negative space) in gagaku and the temporal flexibility of shakuhachi music (Lie, 2011, p. 152).

The synthesis of these influences manifested in Takemitsu's unique style, which transcended East-West binaries through nature as a unifying principle. His works increasingly reflected Zen monism—where sound and silence coexist organically, as heard in *November Steps* (1967)—while retaining Impressionist sound-colour techniques (Calabretto, 2010, p. 112). This duality exemplifies his resolution of cultural dichotomies: where Western music traditionally constructs time through harmonic progression, and Japanese tradition perceives time as flowing and nonlinear, Takemitsu bridged these through ecological acoustics (Burt, 2001, p. 53).

1.3 Inspiration from Nature

Takemitsu's oeuvre demonstrates an unparalleled synthesis of natural philosophy and musical innovation. More than half of his compositions—including concert works like *A String Around Autumn* (1989) and *And Then I Knew 'Twas Wind* (1992)—bear titles explicitly referencing natural phenomena, with seasonal motifs constituting nearly half of his output (Deguchi, 2019, p. 312; Koozin, 2010, p. 58). This reflects his foundational belief that "art both originates from and returns to harmony with nature" (Takemitsu *et al.*, 1995, p. 31), a principle manifest in his distinctive "courtyard aesthetics" (*庭園美学*, *teien bigaku*). Drawing from Japanese garden design, this concept organizes musical elements as a landscape architect arranges stones and plants: "Some parts change like seasons, others remain static as boulders" (Burt, 2001, p. 190). Works such as *In an Autumn Garden* (1973) for gagaku ensemble exemplify this through their temporal ma, which is strategic silences mimicking the negative space in dry gardens (Koizumi, 2008, p. 112), as well as spectral orchestration, which shimmering string harmonics in *Green* (1967) evoking sunlight through foliage (Calabretto, 2010, p. 76).

Takemitsu's nature philosophy transcended mere representation. He perceived seasonal cycles as metaphysical manifestations of cosmic forces — "the rotation of earth carrying creation and death" (Takemitsu *et al.*, 1995, p. 34). This informed his rejection of Western compositional dogma; inspired by Zen monism, he treated sounds as autonomous entities, liberating them through microtonal inflection, such as shakuhachi glissain in *Snow Woman* (1968) to mimic the whistling sound of snow storm (Lie, 2011, p.

34), and non-linear form, mobile-like structures in *Rain Coming* (1982) reflecting unpredictable weather patterns

Central to this was the Japanese concept of *wa* (*和*), the harmonization of apparent opposites—human/nature, East/West, sound/silence. As Zhu (2015, p. 42) notes, Takemitsu achieved in *November Steps* (1967) what no garden could: the simultaneous flowering of biwa and orchestra, where "cultural roots deepen through contact with foreign soils" (Takemitsu *et al.*, 1995, p. 89). This philosophical core makes seasonal culture not merely a thematic concern, but the structural DNA of his film scores.

2. Seasonal Culture in Japan

The significance of seasonal awareness in Japanese culture has deep historical roots, shaped by both environmental and cultural factors. Japan's distinct climatic shifts - from cherry blossoms in spring to snowy winters - have profoundly influenced aesthetic traditions, as seen in classical waka poetry's *kidai* (seasonal references) and ukiyo-e (Li, 2012, p. 78). Rather than universalizing Japanese sensibilities, scholars note how these natural cycles became codified through artistic conventions; the haiku requirement of *kigo* (seasonal words) institutionalized nature's temporal rhythms in literary practice. Takemitsu inherited this culturally mediated relationship with nature - not as deterministic national character, but as an artistic lexicon. His film scores like *Autumn* (1973) translate these traditions into musical terms, where orchestral textures emulate the transience of falling leaves (fūrin wind chimes in high strings) and winter's stasis (sustained low brass clusters) (Koizumi, 2008, p. 145). This reflects what historian Tetsurō (Tani, 2002, p. 502) calls "seasonality as cultural grammar" - a system of signs continually reinterpreted by artists across media.

2.1. Japanese Sense of the Seasons

The artistic engagement with seasonal cycles in Japanese cultural traditions emerges from complex environmental and historical factors. Japan's geographic conditions - including its volcanic activity and maritime climate - have fostered distinctive artistic responses to nature's transience. Scholars note how these conditions appear symbolically in classical literature; for instance, *The Tale of Genji* uses seasonal imagery to mirror emotional arcs, while Bashō's haiku employ *kigo* (seasonal references) as structural elements (Shirane, 2011, p. 45). This tradition continues in modern works like Kawabata Yasunari's *Snow Country*, where seasonal shifts parallel psychological transformations.

The distinct seasonal progression in much of Japan has influenced various art forms through established conventions rather than deterministic psychology. Contemporary cultural practices maintain these seasonal references while adapting to modern contexts. The continued popularity of seasonal cuisine (*washoku*) and festivals (*matsuri*) reflects an ongoing dialogue with traditional environmental awareness (Rath, 2016, p. 78). In cinema, directors like Kore-eda Hirokazu use seasonal transitions as narrative devices, much as Takemitsu employed timbral shifts to signify seasonal changes in his film scores.

2.2. Seasons in Art Forms

Japanese cultural practices demonstrate a refined engagement with seasonal cycles through various art forms. The miniature landscapes of bonsai and the temporal arrangements of ikebana exemplify what art historian Donald Keene (1988) terms "nature in controlled ephemerality" - where artistic mediation transforms natural forms into cultural expressions (1988, p. 73). These traditions, along with seasonal kimono

patterns (*yukata* for Summer, *awase* for winter) and tea ceremony utensils, reflect codified aesthetic conventions rather than essential national character (Saito, 2007). Literary works from the Manyōshū to Kawabata's *Snow Country* employ seasonal motifs (*kidai*) as structural devices, with scholar Shirane (2011) noting how "seasonal references became a literary language independent of actual weather" (p.45).

In Japanese cinema, seasons function as narrative elements beyond mere backdrop. Directors like Ozu Yasujirō (Late Spring) and Kore-eda Hirokazu (Still Walking) use seasonal transitions as temporal markers, while Takemitsu's scores for films such as *Woman in the Dunes* (1964) musically articulate what film scholar Bordwell (1988) identifies as "seasonal consciousness as cinematic syntax" (p. 203). The symbolic quartet of cherry blossoms (spring), ocean waves (summer), *momiji* (autumn), and snow (winter) recurs as what cultural anthropologist Emiko Ohnuki- Tierney (1990) calls "polysemic symbols constantly renegotiated in media" (p.89).

This symbolic complexity necessitates aesthetic distance, where music - particularly in Takemitsu's works - mediates between representation and abstraction. As Koozin (2010) demonstrates, Takemitsu's score for *Ran* (1985) employs "timbral shakuhachi glissandi not to depict autumn leaves, but to evoke their transience through sonic metaphor" (p. 67). The following analysis will examine how Takemitsu's harmonic language and orchestration choices achieve this transcendence of literal depiction.

3. Film Music: Seasonal Image and Metaphor

Film music operates as an essential narrative and affective extension of cinematic language, conveying psychological depth, emotional subtext, and symbolic meaning beyond the visual frame (Chion, 2019). This principle is particularly evident in the work of Tōru Takemitsu, whose approach to film scoring redefined the relationship between sound and image in Japanese cinema. Rather than merely reinforcing the visuals, Takemitsu's compositions function as an independent yet interdependent layer of expression, shaping the film's temporal and spatial dimensions (Deguchi, 2019, p. 312). His scores often resist direct synchronization with on-screen action, instead evoking unseen emotional currents—what Koizumi (2008) describes as "the inaudible resonance between sound and silence" (p. 67).

Takemitsu's treatment of seasonal imagery exemplifies this nuanced approach. Where traditional film music might underscore seasonal changes through predictable motifs (e.g., cherry blossoms paired with delicate melodies), Takemitsu's scores engage with seasons as philosophical concepts rather than literal depictions. To analyse Takemitsu's engagement with seasonal aesthetics in *A Song of Early Spring* (1969), *Dear Summer Sister* (1972), *Glowing Autumn* (1973), and *Winter* (1972), this study adopts a two-part analytical framework, interrogating (1) texture and tempo and (2) harmony and instrumentation. By dissecting these compositional elements, the analysis reveals how Takemitsu's music transcends literal depiction, instead constructing seasons as immersive psychoacoustic environments.

3.1. Texture and Tempo

In music, "texture" describes how musical elements are woven together - from sparse, single-line melodies to rich, multi-layered compositions. Equally important is "tempo" - the speed and rhythmic flow of the music. Takemitsu masterfully combines these elements to create vivid seasonal portraits in his four film scores.

This guitar solo in *A Song of Early Spring* unfolds like a musical stream of consciousness. The texture flows continuously - each musical idea blossoms from the last like spring buds emerging in sequence. While the upper melodies constantly evolve (representing new growth), a recurring bass pattern provides unity, much like the reliable cycle of seasons. The tempo remains fluid, with subtle accelerations that mimic nature's

quickening pulse in springtime. Particularly striking are the moments where the guitar's arpeggios (broken chords) seem to tumble over one another, creating a sense of joyful urgency - nature waking from winter's sleep.

Takemitsu adopts a more relaxed approach in *Dear Summer Sister*. The texture features distinct musical "islands" separated by pauses - like waves receding between breaks on shore. The dotted rhythms (characteristic short-long patterns) create a swaying motion around a central pitch, evoking both ocean tides and summer's languid pace. Tempo fluctuations are more pronounced than in Spring - phrases expand and contract like the humid summer air itself. In the film's beach scenes, the music's ebb and flow perfectly match the visual rhythm of waves and the characters' leisurely movements.

For *Glowing Autumn*, Takemitsu employs "ribbon texture" - multiple melodic lines moving in parallel like leaves falling in unison. The harmonies shift gradually, producing subtle color changes akin to autumn foliage transitioning through hues. The tempo remains steady but unhurried, with occasional ritardandos (slowdowns) that suggest leaves hesitating in their descent. Particularly effective are the passages where high woodwinds and strings create a shimmering effect - like sunlight filtering through changing leaves. The strategic use of silence between phrases speaks to autumn's reflective quality, the pause between summer's energy and winter's stillness.

Winter's texture is deliberately fragmented - isolated musical gestures appear like snowflakes materializing from silence. The tempo is unpredictable, with abrupt pauses that create a sense of suspended time. Percussive sounds (like struck piano strings) mimic ice cracking, while sustained string tones evoke the strange acoustic properties of winter air. Unlike the other seasons' more predictable rhythms, Winter incorporates irregular tempo shifts and overlapping rhythmic layers that mirror how snow alters our perception of time and space. The sparse texture allows individual sounds to resonate profoundly - much like how winter's quiet makes us notice small sounds more acutely.

Through these sophisticated combinations of texture and tempo, Takemitsu achieves something remarkable: his scores do not merely accompany seasonal imagery - they embody the very essence of each season's temporal and textural qualities. Spring's vitality emerges through flowing lines and quickening pulses, summer's languor through relaxed phrases and rhythmic undulations, autumn's transition through layered colours and gradual decelerations, and winter's suspension through fragmented sounds and elastic time. This goes beyond musical illustration to create a profound sensory experience of nature's cycles - one that resonates with universal human experiences of seasonal change while remaining rooted in Japanese aesthetic traditions.

3.2. Harmony and Timbre

While texture and rhythm establish seasonal atmospheres, harmony and timbre serve as Takemitsu's most potent tools for conveying seasonal essence and emotional depth. His harmonic language—ranging from diatonic clarity to complex chromatic clusters—creates immediate psychological impressions that mirror nature's transitions.

In *The Song of Early Spring*, The guitar's radiant E major tonality, frequently inflected with added sixth (C#) and ninth (F#) tones, produces an open, luminous quality. Takemitsu employs quartal harmony (chords built in fourths rather than thirds) in the bass progression (E-A-D-G), evoking unfurling growth. The instrument's natural overtone resonance mimics spring's acoustic transparency—where every sound carries crystalline clarity. Notably, the absence of traditional cadential resolution (V-I) sustains a sense of perpetual emergence, musically representing spring's unfinished renewal.

Dear Summer Sister's jazz-inflected harmony revolves around bluesy Eb major with flattened thirds (Gb) and sevenths (Db). The saxophone's warm vibrato against celesta's pure fifths creates a timbral tension akin to heat haze. Takemitsu's use of polytonality—where the bass line persists in C minor while upper voices shift to Eb major—sonifies

summer's duality of languor and vitality. The percussion's metallic shimmer (triangle, bell tree) operates not as ornamentation but as harmonic participants, their partials interacting with pitched material to form "accidental" chords.

In *Glowing Autumn*, the season's melancholy emerges through a modal D minor that ambiguously fluctuates with its parallel major (D major). The strings' rich vibrato activates the harmonic series, creating acoustic "halos" around each tone. Takemitsu employs what music theorist Koozin (2010) terms "vanishing cadences"—where expected resolutions (like ii-V-I) dissolve into whole-tone clusters (mm. 32-35), mirroring autumn leaves losing structural integrity. The final "solution" to Bb major (VI) arrives not as triumph but as bittersweet acceptance of cyclical change.

In *Winter*, Takemitsu abandons traditional tonality here, instead using a "timbre-centric" approach where instrumental combinations generate harmonic meaning. The sho's sustained clusters (E-F#-A-B) interact with piano's muted strings to create beating interference patterns—an acoustic metaphor for snow's sound-absorbing quality. Rather than harmonic progression, we hear frozen stasis: perfect fourths (*hichiriki*) and major sevenths (*shakuhachi*) remain unresolved, embodying winter's suspended animation. As Deguchi (2019) notes, these "non-teleological" harmonies reject Western narrative expectations in favour of Japanese *ma* (negative space) principles (p. 314).

Takemitsu's harmonic strategies transcend accompaniment—they construct a phenomenology of seasonal perception. By synchronizing timbral spectra with harmonic tension/release patterns, he achieves what film scholar (Chion, 2019)calls "auditory landscapes" where listeners do not just hear but inhabit seasonal consciousness (p. 89)This approach reflects the Japanese aesthetic of mono no aware—the profound awareness of transience that transforms observation into participation.

3.3. Music and Pictures: *Dear Summer Sister*

Takemitsu's methodology for film scoring fundamentally challenged conventional production practices (Lehrich, 2014, p. 218) where standard industry protocols typically relegated composers to post-production—receiving edited footage with predetermined musical cues—Takemitsu insisted on immersive pre-production involvement. As Deguchi (2019) documents, he regularly attended filming locations, not merely to observe but to absorb the "tactile atmosphere" of sets and the "unspoken rhythms" of actors' movements (p. 307). His discussions with directors extended beyond musical placement to encompass philosophical dialogues about narrative metaphysics—what Koizumi (2008) terms his "holistic sound-image epistemology" (p. 73)

This proactive engagement yielded two revolutionary outcomes. First, it allowed Takemitsu to develop musical materials that grew organically from the film's conceptual core rather than merely decorating finished scenes. For *Woman in the Dunes* (1964), his early access to Abe Kōbō's screenplay inspired the use of *shō* (mouth organ) microtones to sonify the novel's existential themes—a decision made before shooting commenced (Calabretto, 2010, p. 92). Second, his presence during filming enabled what Koizumi (2014) identifies as "reciprocal influence"—where his provisional musical ideas sometimes reshaped visual pacing, as evidenced in Ran's (1985) battle sequences being edited to pre-existing rhythmic structures (p. 156).

This methodology reflected Takemitsu's belief that film music should be "architectural rather than cosmetic" (Takemitsu *et al.*, 1995, p. 81)—a spatial element constructed alongside imagery rather than applied afterward. His notebooks reveal meticulous pre-compositional work: spectral analyses of location recordings, timbre maps correlating instruments with lighting schemes, and harmonic progressions derived from script punctuation patterns (Deguchi, 2019, p. 313). Such practices redefined the composer's role from service provider to co-author of the film's sensory ontology.

This section examines Takemitsu's score for *Dear Summer Sister* (1972, dir. Ōshima Nagisa), a film that explores themes of familial discovery against the backdrop of Okinawa's tropical landscape. The narrative follows 14-year-old Sunaoko, who travels from Tokyo to Naha with her father's fiancée, Momoko, in search of an estranged half-brother—only to find him working as a local tour guide (Thayne, 2022). Takemitsu's soundtrack, including the eponymous theme later anthologized in Film Music by Tōru Takemitsu, transcends conventional diegetic accompaniment, instead sonically articulating the film's tension between urban modernity and Okinawan tradition.

Takemitsu's approach diverges from stereotypical "summer music" tropes (e.g., bright major keys, buoyant rhythms). As Koizumi (2008) notes, his score employs a jazz-inflected chromaticism—saxophone melismas over shifting augmented harmonies—to mirror the protagonist's disorientation in Okinawa's unfamiliar heat (p. 118). The celesta's metallic timbre, paired with irregular pizzicato bass, evokes what Deguchi (2019) terms "tactile humidity" (p. 299) while the tour guide's sanshin (Okinawan lute) performances ground the film's cultural hybridity in audible friction.

Crucially, Takemitsu avoids exoticizing Okinawa through musical clichés. Where contemporaneous scores might deploy *min'yō* folk motifs to signal "otherness," his theme's restrained pentatonic fragments—woven into dissonant string textures—reflect (Calabretto, 2010)observation that Takemitsu treated location as "psychogeography rather than postcard" (p. 76). This is epitomized in the brother's revelation scene: as Sunaoko recognizes him, the music dissolves into *ma* (silence)-filled guitar harmonics, sonifying the gap between expectation and reality. By interleaving jazz improvisation's spontaneity with Okinawa's indigenous soundscape, Takemitsu's score embodies summer not as mere setting but as a transformative force—where familial and cultural identities, like the season itself, remain in fluid negotiation.

Takemitsu's film scoring philosophy, as articulated by Deguchi (2019) fundamentally rejects the Hollywood model of proliferative thematic assignment in favour of what might be termed "semiotic minimalism" (p. 104). This approach manifests in Dear Summer Sister through an intricate web of musical associations, where limited thematic material undergoes continuous transformation to reflect the film's central seasonal metaphor. The score's structural economy belies its conceptual richness, with each recurrence of thematic material accumulating new layers of meaning through subtle variations in instrumentation, harmonic language, and rhythmic treatment.

The primary thematic material, appearing nine times throughout the film's duration, establishes summer's essential duality through its carefully wrought musical construction. Built upon a pentatonic-derived melodic foundation in E major, the theme immediately problematizes its tonal centre through the strategic incorporation of added #11 dissonances and quartal harmonic voicings. This harmonic tension, coupled with the theme's metrical ambiguity through alternating 6/8 and 5/8 time signatures, musically embodies what (Thayne, 2022) identifies as the "marine *chronotope*" in Japanese cinema - the sea as both life-sustaining presence and potential agent of destruction. Takemitsu's orchestration further develops this dialectic through the alternating timbral contrast between jazz-inflected saxophone and the celesta's crystalline purity, a sonic representation of the urban-rural dichotomy central to the narrative.

The theme's narrative trajectory reveals Takemitsu's mastery of musical storytelling. Its initial full ensemble statement during the ship's arrival sequence establishes summer's fundamental paradox through the juxtaposition of undulating 6/8 rhythms against sudden harmonic shifts to B minor clusters. Subsequent recurrences demonstrate increasingly sophisticated variations, such as the fragmented woodwind version accompanying Sunaoko's jungle letter-reading scene, where the thematic reduction to its basic motivic components mirrors the protagonist's single-minded determination. Particularly noteworthy is Takemitsu's withholding of traditional Okinawan instrumentation during the siblings' initial encounters, a deliberate musical omission that foreshadows their failure to recognize their familial connection. The theme's final transformation in

the epilogue, reduced to spectral harp harmonics and shakuhachi breaths, achieves what Koizumi (2008) describes as the "seasonal contract" (p. 69) where summer's contradictions are absorbed rather than resolved.

The secondary thematic material, associated with Momoko's character, introduces crucial narrative friction through its distinct musical profile. Constructed around a chromatic descent in G# Aeolian, this theme employs irregular phrase structures and microtonal inflections to create what (Gorbman, 1987) terms "unheard melodies" (p. 23) - musical expressions of subtextual psychological dynamics. Its most revealing articulation occurs during the beach walk sequence, where the unexpected emergence of a perfect fourth interval (C#-F#) within the otherwise tense harmonic field musically encodes Momoko's complex role as both narrative obstacle and essential catalyst for growth. This moment exemplifies Takemitsu's ability to invest seemingly simple musical gestures with profound dramatic significance.

The epilogue's musical strategy of subtraction and dissolution represents the score's conceptual apex. By reducing the primary theme to its spectral components while entirely eliminating the secondary material, Takemitsu avoids conventional resolution in favor of what might be termed "meteorological counterpoint" - a musical system where themes interact as dynamic seasonal forces rather than narrative signposts. The gradual emergence of tape-manipulated ocean sounds in the final measures completes this sonic metaphor, suggesting the cyclical nature of both seasonal and human experience.

Through this intricate musical construction, Takemitsu achieves a remarkable synthesis of form and content. The score's apparent simplicity belies its profound engagement with summer's phenomenological complexity - not as mere setting or symbol, but as Calabretto (2010) describes as "psychogeography" (p. 76), a fully realized musical landscape that shapes narrative meaning while resisting literal representation. This analysis demonstrates how Takemitsu's economical thematic deployment creates a rich network of musical associations that simultaneously advance narrative development, psychological characterization, and seasonal metaphor, establishing Dear Summer Sister as a paradigm of sophisticated film scoring practice.

4. Conclusion

Takemitsu's film music constitutes a sophisticated semiotic system wherein seasonal phenomena are not merely represented but phenomenologically reconstituted through sound. His compositional approach transcends conventional film scoring paradigms through what might be termed "ecological audiovisuality" - a mode of musical discourse that engages with natural cycles as both structural principle and metaphysical inquiry. The persistent seasonal preoccupation throughout his cinematic works demonstrates not simply thematic consistency, but rather the development of a comprehensive auditory epistemology of temporal flux.

The composer's technique operates through a dual process of musical embodiment and cultural mediation. As Koizumi (2014) observes, Takemitsu's scores achieve "the sonic equivalent of mono no aware" (p. 142) capturing nature's transience through carefully wrought musical gestures that simultaneously reference and transcend their cultural origins. This is particularly evident in his treatment of seasonal motifs, where traditional Japanese aesthetic concepts like *ma* (*間*) and *yūgen* (*幽玄*) are reconfigured through modernist harmonic and timbral vocabularies. The resulting synthesis creates what Deguchi (2019) identifies as "chrono-timbral" effects (p. 118) - sound events that articulate both seasonal progression and cultural memory.

Takemitsu's significance within film music studies lies precisely in his dismantling of the utilitarian hierarchy between image and sound. Through works like Dear Summer Sister, he demonstrates how musical materials can function as equal partners in cinematic discourse, not through programmatic illustration but via the creation of parallel

yet interdependent temporal architectures. His approach aligns with what Calabretto (2010) terms "meteorological counterpoint" (p. 83), where musical elements interact with visual components according to principles analogous to natural systems rather than narrative conventions.

This compositional philosophy carries important implications for interdisciplinary art studies. Takemitsu's practice exemplifies how cultural frameworks - in this case, Japanese seasonal consciousness - can facilitate profound intermedial dialogue. His scores do not simply accompany images but engage in continuous hermeneutic exchange with them, creating what might be called an "audiovisual haiku" structure: brief yet potent conjunctions of sound and image that suggest deeper seasonal resonances.

The enduring scholarly interest in Takemitsu's film music attests to its value as both artistic achievement and conceptual model. His work demonstrates how musical composition can extend beyond traditional boundaries to incorporate ecological, cultural and philosophical dimensions while maintaining rigorous formal integrity. For contemporary researchers, Takemitsu's legacy offers not merely repertoire for analysis but a methodological paradigm - one that challenges artificial distinctions between art forms while respecting their essential differences. In this regard, his film scores continue to provide fertile ground for investigations into the nature of musical meaning, the phenomenology of listening, and the potential for intercultural dialogue through artistic practice.

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Cherry Blossoms and Sweet Sentimentalism: The Sakura Song Boom in the 2000s and its image of *Japaneseness*

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Abstract: In the 2000s, Japan experienced a major trend in pop music known as the 'Sakura Song Boom,' featuring songs associated with cherry blossoms (*sakura*). Even 20 years later, these songs remain popular. This essay examines four songs from this boom and the cultural phenomenon itself, analysing two commercial web articles that emphasise the image of cherry blossoms, strongly linked to Japan and its people. The essay explores the supposed *Japaneseness* and nationalism in these articles. By examining song lyrics, advertising, and circulation, this study investigates whether a collective image of cherry blossoms exists in these songs and their social function. The essay also explores why cherry blossoms became popular in the 2000s. Cherry blossoms symbolise changes and transitions in contemporary Japanese society due to their association with spring events, such as the start of the fiscal year, school terms, and graduation ceremonies. The songs depict protagonists' sentimental emotions triggered by these changes. The essay reveals how the songs and the boom conveyed common performances of sentimental emotions and collective identities, reinforcing *Japaneseness* and nationalism featured in the articles.

Keywords: *Cherry blossoms; Japanese pop music; seasons in popular culture; Sakura Songs; collective identities; nature in culture; nature and nation*

1. Introduction

The year 2000 is known among others as the beginning of what is commonly labelled the 'Sakura Song Boom' (*sakura songu būmu*) in contemporary Japan. During this boom, many musicians released songs about cherry blossoms. These songs are widely consumed to this day, and some artists even released new versions of these songs in the early 2020s, which will be explored in detail in the song analysis section of this research.

Sakura Songs colour numerous aspects of Japanese daily life in spring: Theme songs from popular soap operas on TV, music programs on the radio, advertisement videos on the internet, and various media feature songs associated with cherry blossoms. Pop songs related to seasons, such as Sakura Songs, beach songs, and snow songs, are one of the many ways to celebrate the changing of the seasons in contemporary Japanese popular culture. In order to consider this new celebration of the changing of seasons in today's Japan, the massive boom of Sakura Songs during the 2000s is a valuable phenomenon to investigate. This article explores four songs released during the Sakura Song Boom and ultimately the boom itself. Focusing on song lyrics and how the songs are circulated and consumed, this essay will attempt to answer the following questions: Is there a collective image of cherry blossoms shared in the Sakura Songs? If so, is there any social function encapsulated in the shared image of cherry blossoms in these songs? Why did the image of cherry blossoms become popular and widely consumed in the 2000s?

As this essay investigates these research questions, I will argue that the image of cherry blossoms in Sakura Songs has sentimental emotions as a common characteristic and is associated with changes in livelihood that happen in spring. As these events are

associated with sweet memories in the song lyrics, such as romantic feelings and friendships in one's school days, the sentimentalism in these songs is often utilized to create and relate to positive affects rather than negative emotions. Hereafter, I will refer to the affect experienced by the consumers of Sakura Songs as "sweet sentimentalism". This sweet sentimentalism is widely shared among listeners as the sentimental connotation is intertwined in a commonly conceived orientation towards the image of cherry blossoms in the songs. To explore these research questions, the current essay will also delve into the image of cherry blossoms depicted in two commercial web articles about the Sakura Song Boom in the 2000s. These two articles draw connections between the Sakura Songs and changes and transitions that take place in springtime while considering the role of Sakura Songs as vehicles of sentimental emotions. Moreover, the two articles create a facile connection between the image of Sakura and Japaneseness. Both articles associate the sensibility of this sentimentalism with the image of the Japanese by applying phrases like 'Why do they keep captivating the heart of the Japanese?' (Oricon, 2013) and Japanese people's 'sensibility to feel something with seasons' (O.D.A, 2019). To establish and assert this facile connection, they employ references in both the literary and cultural traditions of Japan.

In her book, *Ecology without Culture: Aesthetics for a Toxic World*, Christine L. Marran introduces the concept of '*biotrope*', with which she asserts that the 'biological world inherently indicates both the material and the semiotics' (Marran, 2017, p. 6). As a basis of this concept, Marran argues that nature is used 'to create unassailable identities' (2017, p. 3). The concept of *biotrope* helps us to comprehend the narrative of Japaneseness associated with the image of cherry blossoms in Sakura Songs. Indeed, Marran goes on to explain the strength of the *biotrope* and the application thereof in narrative:

> *Biotropes may be semiotically powerful in narrative because of the quality of that biological origin, even as that original scape is enfolded tightly into humanistic metaphor* (2017, p. 6).

One example in which the strength of the *sakura biotrope* introduced by Marran can be seen is the narrative of the Japanese people's hope to recover from the catastrophic disaster in 2011. Marran points directly to the famous Japanese author Murakami Haruki's speech held in Catalunya, Spain, in June 2011. Marran explains that in his speech, Murakami 'parlayed the *biotrope* of the cherry blossom to claim Japan as an ethnic national collective that would inevitably recover from the catastrophic experience of tsunami flooding and nuclear meltdown' (2017, p. 7). She then mentions that Murakami's idea stands on centuries-old cultural traditions:

> *'Murakami's hope for recovery in the expansive disaster zone rested on a centuries-old concept of mutability as expressed in classical Japanese aesthetics'* (Marran, 2017, p. 7).

This association with the image of cherry blossoms and Japaneseness is shared not only among writers and creators in Japan but also conceived to a certain extent internationally. Another example of the narrative of Japaneseness associated with the image of cherry blossoms that was used to represent the Japanese people's hope of revival after the disaster can be seen in British filmmaker Lucy Walker's documentary film, *The Tsunami and the Cherry Blossom* (2011). As she clearly and adamantly asserted on the official website of the film, she has been fascinated by the beauty of the cherry blossom even before she started making this documentary film. The latter half of the film is filled with the beautiful image of sakura. Associating the image of the sakura with the idea of Japaneseness by introducing interviews with the victims of the disaster who express their special attachment to the blossoms, Walker establishes the image of sakura as a symbol of revival (*fukkō*) from the disaster, connecting it with her image of the collective identity of the Japanese people. Indeed, Walker explains her association between the cherry and Japaneseness on her website:

> *'The [cherry] blossoms also reflect so many emotions, memories, and facets of Japanese character.' Additionally, she mentions the changes and transitions in one's life associated with the image*

> *of spring: 'the spring coincides with the start and end of the school year and so is full of associations of first meetings and final farewells'* (Walker, 2011).

As the current essay will reveal shortly, this aspect of spring, symbolised in the image of cherry blossoms, is heavily featured in both of the web articles about the Sakura Song Boom.

According to Walker's website, the image of cherry blossoms serves as a symbol of Japan, the Japanese people and culture, and was a major inspiration for her film. In the film, the image of harmony between the Japanese and nature, and the commonly imagined sense of unity among the Japanese, both represented by the image of beautiful cherry blossoms, play a significant role as a symbol of hope for recovering from the disaster. Such examples related to the idea of recovery are case-in-point examples for the strength of *biotropes* in narratives.

The two web articles about the Sakura Song Boom present musicians and listeners as successors of the classic *biotrope,* which 'employ[s] *bios* to produce *ethnos*' (Marran, 2017, p. 11). According to Carolyn S. Stevens, these commercial media and non-academic writers are 'the real arbiters of taste'(2008, p. 4) in the market of Japanese pop music. Considering their substantial influence on consumers' opinions and the wide-reaching consumption of the media, the narrative of Japaneseness in the two articles is too significant to neglect. Although the scope of this essay is limited to a specific group of people who consume these songs and information about these songs, such as the two web articles, I believe that investigating the supposed Japaneseness in the two web articles can capture one aspect of the cultural milieu of contemporary Japanese popular culture, ultimately analysing how the modern-day connection between sakura and the imagined Japaneseness is generated, disseminated, and maintained.

The association between the sakura image and Japaneseness is, in fact, a modern invention, according to Japanese historian Nakamoto Maoko. Tropes of cherry blossoms have existed since the pre-modern era, as can be seen in various pieces of classical Japanese literature. An esteemed Japanese literature scholar, Haruo Shirane, points out that it was in the Heian period (794-1185) that cherry blossoms became the main flowers of spring alongside plum and yellow *kerria*. In *Kokinwakashū* (905), the first imperial collection of *waka* poems, the word *hana*, meaning flower, came to refer 'primarily to the cherry blossoms (*sakura*), indicating that it had become the supreme flower of spring' (2012: 35). As one can perhaps imagine, there are numerous poems of cherry blossoms in this collection. However, according to Nakamoto, it was in the Meiji period (1868-1912) that scholars and writers started associating tropes of cherry blossoms with the image of the Japanese. By stating that *someiyoshino*, the most common type of cherry tree in the archipelago today, was first cultivated at the end of the Edo period (1603-1868) and then bred on a wider scale throughout the Meiji period, Nakamoto argues that 'landscapes of cherry blossoms' that had wide variety depending on regions were changed into landscapes of 'a single kind of cherry blossom,' which was newly planted *someiyoshino* (2023, p. 512). Nakamoto also argues that the afforestation of *someiyoshino* was accelerated by the two victories in the Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895) and the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905). The starting point of the dissemination of this new kind of cherry blossoms indeed overlaps with the rise of cultural nationalism.

Some scholars, such as Suzuki Sadami, characterize the victory of the Russo-Japanese War as the trigger of the culmination of cultural nationalism among writers, scholars, and politicians of Meiji Japan (2005, p. 153).

An example Nakamoto provides is Nitobe Inazō's monograph, *Bushido* (1899). She argues that *Bushido* contributed to 'nationalizing the time' (*jikan no koku Minka*). By associating tropes of cherry blossoms, which have been loved and referenced in songs and poems, and *bushi* (warriors), an elite class in the pre-modern era, with contemporary Japanese people (of his time), Nitobe created an image of "Japan" which transcends time and connects the past and the present (Nakamoto, 2023, p. 506).

Nakamoto also mentions that around the same time as *Bushido*, there was a narrative that associated the image of cherry blossoms with collectivism (*shūdan shugi*). During this period, it was a common metaphor to describe the West with roses and Japan with cherry blossoms. Nitobe indeed applies this trope in his book as well. The image of Japan became connected with collectivism through cherry blossoms, and this resulted in "cherry blossom nationalism" (*sakura nashonarizumu*) both in the pre-war era and during the war (2023, p. 505). Consequently, Nakamoto argues that the Sakura Song Boom in the 2000s, which was influenced by the global trend of nationalism as a reaction to intense globalization, and more importantly, the image of cherry blossoms in the boom had its roots in this nationalistic image of the flower that had appeared and was widely spread before and during the war (2023, p. 497). It follows then that the sweet sentimentalism in the songs of the Sakura Song Boom has a certain function with regard to this kind of nationalism. I argue that the sweet sentimentalism indeed functions as a bond, which brings cohesiveness to the people in the imagined community 'Japan' conceived by the consumers and distributors of the songs and their orientations circulated by popular media, such as the two articles featured in this essay. When consumers share these Sakura Songs, they also share the positive connotations of the songs that feature sweet sentimentalism, and this sweet sentimentalism helps to establish the image of *Japaneseness* as a collective identity. As David Leheny explains in his *Empire of Hope*, these shared 'common performances of emotions' create the sense of 'collective identities' (Leheny, 2018, p. 10). In this regard, the Sakura Song Boom which occurred during the 2000s is worth investigating as an exemplar of the commonly imagined connection between sakura and *Japaneseness* in contemporary Japanese popular culture.

This essay will first provide an overview of the boom itself, the two web articles, and the four song examples. After that, by analysing the four songs' lyrics, the current essay aims to disclose the aforementioned sweet sentimentalism. Subsequently, in the conclusion, this essay will analyse the nationalistic connotation of the Sakura Songs mentioned in the two commercial articles, as well as the role of sweet sentimentalism in the nationalistic connotation of the image of cherry blossoms.

2. The Boom, the two web articles, and the four songs

In her *Japanese Popular Music* (2008), Carolyn S. Stevens explains the importance of sales-oriented commercial writing when one analyses Japanese pop music. Stevens emphasises the importance of acknowledging the vigorous non-academic musical publishing industry in Japan, aimed at general readers. She continues to detail two reasons why she included non-academic writers in her study: 'First, because they are widely read by consumers, they have real influence; secondly, because the publication time lag is very short, the content is more up to date than academic books and journals' (2008, p. 3). Subsequently, she explains the terms to describe writers in the industry. She argues that terms like *hyōronka* and *hihyōka*—in English, critics—are getting replaced by *raitā* (writer). As she clarifies, 'more closely aligned with the industry,' these journalists work to promote contracted artists.' Another important term is *baiyā* (buyer) for large record franchise shops such as HMV and Tower Records. After introducing these terms, Stevens emphasises the importance of the popular press in studying Japanese pop music: 'Japanese pop music texts from *ongaku hyōronka*, *raitā*, and *baiyā* have influenced audiences' interpretations of trends, creating a mass' preferred reading' of pop music. The writers—more so than the academics—are real 'arbiters of taste,' shaping the public response to the mass media (2008, p. 4).

On March 8, 2019, a music writer (or *raitā*), O. D. A., published a web article titled 'The Rise and Fall of Sakura Song Boom' on *Ongaku Natarī* (Music Natalie). *Natalie* (*Natarī*) is a pop culture website launched in 2007. It covers five categories of pop culture: music (*Ongaku Natarī*), comics (*Comikku Natarī*), comedy (*Owarai Natarī*), movies (*Eiga Natarī*), and theatre (*Stēji Natarī*). They also run their online merchandise store, the Natalie Store (*Natarī Sutoa*). Each of these categories has its own Facebook, X, and Instagram

presence. On top of the three social media accounts, *Ongaku Natarī* runs a YouTube and TikTok channel. *Ongaku Natarī*'s X account has 1.2M followers as of December 26, 2024, while their competitor, *Oricon*, which is often compared with Billboard as its Japanese equivalent (Stevens, 2008, p. 4) has 1M followers.

The author lists Fukuyama Masaharu's *Sakurazaka* and aiko *Sakura no Toki* as the beginning of the boom. O. D. A emphasises Chaku Uta as the trigger of the boom. As it is mentioned in the article, Chaku Uta, which is a short version of a song one could download and use as a ringtone on one's cell phone (*chaku* is derived from *chakushin on* and means ringtone; *uta* means song), became a major way to consume pop songs in Japan. Chaku Uta, at its beginning, was a short version of songs. It was usually just one chorus or a verse, as it was meant to be used as a ringtone. The article argues that this need for shorter versions of songs forced creators to create a song that evokes a vivid visual image. Cherry blossoms were a 'useful' theme for the seller of this service, not only because they depict vibrant imagery but also because of their strong association with 'encountering and parting' (*deai to wakare*) and 'floweriness and perishability' (*hanayakasa to hakanasa*). These words, especially *wakare* (parting) and *hakanasa* (perishability), have sentimental connotations. They are linked with emotional climaxes associated with sentimental feelings. Here, we can see the tinge of sweet sentimentalism associated with events and imagery that occur in spring, represented by the cherry blossoms. According to the article, the cell phone companies were attracted to the commercial value of a commodity that evokes an affectual reaction, and as the demand increased, artists created more Sakura Songs, taking advantage of the apparent sentimentalism, as can be seen in the next section of the current investigation. Moreover, the fact that the web article written in 2019 largely features this sentimental aspect of Sakura Songs during the Sakura Song Boom in the early 2000s indicates that there is an established, inextricable link between the early Sakura Songs and sentimentalism that is still effective almost twenty years after the original releases. As Stevens reminds us how non-academic writers shape consumers' tastes and responses in the field of Japanese pop music, the article on *Ongaku Natarī* can emerge as the key to seeing the connotations of these songs shared among the consumers.

In her essay, Nakamoto explains the beginning and unpacks the significance of the boom. She argues that for a long time after the Second World War, there were no well-known popular songs featuring cherry blossoms. As mentioned previously, during the war, the image of sakura was bound to nationalism. The beautifully ephemeral image of cherry blossoms, loaded with militarism and patriotism, eventually came to be used to glorify *tokkōtai* or the Divine Wind Special Attack Unit, the suicide attack unit in WWII.[5] According to Nakamoto, the trauma of this wartime image of the flower prevented musicians from writing songs about sakura for at least a decade after the war. She also points out that, even though the positive image of cherry blossoms came back around the time of the Tokyo Olympics (1964), until the 1990s, there were not a lot of songs that largely featured cherry blossoms in the realm of popular music. She argues that considering this context, 'the emergence of 'sakura' songs in the 2000s, its popularity, in other words, the phenomenon that 'young people' (*wakamono*) sang about sakura, and that it was accepted by generations in the society can be considered a big change (or return)' (Nakamoto, 2023, p. 500).

The Natalie article mentions that, after its peak in 2009 with thirty-seven Sakura Songs released in one spring, the boom began to decline with the rise of smartphones[6], music streaming services[7], and the dissemination of YouTube. The timeline provided by the website shows that the number of Sakura Songs released in one spring dipped to as low as eight in 2019, a stark contrast to the thirty-seven ten years before.

[5] Anthropologist Ohnuki-Tierney Emiko explores this association between the image of sakura and tokkōtai in her monograph, *Kamikaze, Cherry Blossoms, and Nationalism: The Militarization of Aesthetics in Japanese* (2010 [2002]).

[6] iPhone started to be sold in Japan July 2008.

[7] Apple Music and Spotify began their services in 2015 and 2016, respectively.

Nakamoto also provides her reader context for the era. According to her, the early 2000s overlaps with a brief trend of nationalism, which was a reaction to expanding globalisation. As examples, she lists: the 2002 FIFA World Cup, during which supporters of the Japanese team painted their faces with the national flag; the consequent surge of anti-Korean sentiment; the establishment of the first Abe administration in 2006; and the publication of *Puchi nashonarizumu shōkōgun shōkōgun-wakamonoshōkōgun-wakamono tachi no Nippon shugi* (Petit Nationalism Syndrome—Japan Principle of Young People) by psychiatrist and critic Kayama Rika in 2002 (Kayama, 2002; 2023, p. 498). This temporal upturn of nationalism may also have played a role in the temporality of the Sakura Song Boom.

Out of the many Sakura Songs released in the 2000s, this essay focuses on the lyrics and advertisement methods of four different songs. The songs were chosen using a second web article published on the *Oricon* website in March 2013. The publication date of the article places its appearance just after the peak of the boom.

The first song was *Sakurazaka* by Fukuyama Masaharu, released in 2000. In both *Natalie* and *Oricon*'s articles, *Sakurazaka* is introduced as the beginning of the boom. In the same year, Aiko released *Sakura no Toki*. The article on *Natalie* marks this song as another beginning of the boom, along with Fukuyama's *Sakurazaka*. The other two songs are *Sakura (dokushō)* (*dokushō* means vocal solo) by Moriyama Naotarō, released in 2003, and *Sakura* by Ketsumeishi, released in 2005. The latter two artists re-introduced their songs to a new generation, ca. 15 years later: Moriyama released *Sakura (2019)* and *Sakura (2020 Gasshō)* (*gasshō* means choir) in 2019 and 2020, respectively, as mentioned in the song titles themselves. Ketsumeishi released a new music video for the song in 2021, titled *Sakura (2021 ver.)*. As it is to be explained in detail in the later song analysis part of this essay, these new forms of the two songs were widely consumed when they were released. The fact that these two songs regained their commercial success after around fifteen years reveals their continuous popularity among the songs released during the boom. Moreover, in the article by *Oricon*, both songs are introduced as 'classic' (*ōdō*) Sakura Songs, and in the article by *Natalie*, Ketsumeishi's *Sakura* is introduced as the 'trigger' of the boom. Therefore, this current study analyses these two songs in addition to Fukuyama and Aiko's songs.

According to the *Oricon* chart, Fukuyama's *Sakurazaka* sold more than 2,299,000 CDS: an enormous hit. Moriyama also sold more than a million CDS. His *Sakura (Dokushō)* sales surpassed 1,063,000 CDS and showed up on the weekly *Oricon* chart 133 times. Although Ketsumeishi's *Sakura* did not reach a million, they sold 962,000 CDS. In both cases, the songs were the best-selling songs of their respective careers as musicians. By comparison, the production of Aiko's *Sakura no Toki* was limited to 200,000 CDS, only 134,000 CDS of which were sold. Although it was a limited production, this tune is the ninth most-sold song released by Aiko, who has been at the forefront of the Japanese pop music scene for more than 20 years as of 2024. More importantly, as mentioned before, Aiko's song is regarded as the beginning of the boom along with Fukuyama's smash hit.

Both websites mention the association between *sakura* and changes or transitions in one's life.

> *The bloom season of cherry, spring, is the season that has many changes, such as encountering and parting (deai to wakare), departure (tabidachi), start of a new life (shin-seikatsu no hajimari), and so on (Oricon, 2013 Translated by the author).*

> *In Spring, which is the season of the beginning of new life (and it is the season people buy new mobile phones), many songs that have 'sakura' in their titles are released. Each company's Chaku Uta website features articles about 'Sakura Songs' in spring (O.D.A, 2019, translated by the author).*

As a matter of fact, each of the four songs shares the image of sakura as a symbol of changes and transitions in life. Fukuyama's, Aiko's, and Ketsumeishi's songs apply this image to romantic love. In Fukuyama's and Ketsumeishi's songs, sakura is used to evoke

nostalgic feelings towards their love in the past, and the memory of the romance is beautified. Putting it another way, sakura functions as a symbol of change, and the protagonists in these two songs remember the romantic climax in their lives. There is a distinct contrast between changing seasons and enduring memories of romance, which essentially belong to the past. As opposed to these two songs, aiko's *Sakura no Toki* illustrates her wish for her boyfriend's love to be unchanged while they go through the changing of the seasons. Unlike Fukuyama and Ketsumeishi, aiko illustrates her wish for unchanging love towards the future in contrast with the changes of the seasons.

Moriyama's song is often associated with graduation, a big turning point (*fushime*) in one's life. In the lyrics, one can see the comparison between the transition of the seasons and a big transition in one's life, which is graduation, a departure from one's school days, teachers, and friends. In this example, the seasons change as the protagonist also experiences an important change in his life. The song became, consequently, a staple in graduation ceremonies. In February 2021, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Moriyama launched a project called 'The Sakura Gift Project' (*Sakura o okuru purojekuto*). This online project targeted high-school students supposed to graduate that year. On the campaign website, high schoolers could upload their movies of their memories of high school days. The website automatically created a sequence of movies with *Sakura (2020 Gasshō)* as the background music. In 2021, Moriyama himself virtually joined the graduation ceremony of Tobata High School in Kitakyūshū city in Fukuoka prefecture and sang his original rendition of *Sakura*. Some parts of the graduation ceremony were filmed and released on YouTube. As of December 26, 2024, the video gained 8,897,515 viewers. These usages of Moriyama's *Sakura* explain the song's reputation as the staple of graduation ceremonies, even after more than two decades have passed since its release.

Although they show some variety of reactions to the changing of the seasons, all the examples depict sakura as a symbol of changes and transitions. The lyrics of these songs feature protagonists who are facing changes and transitions in their lives. Ideas of the changes are symbolised by the imagery of cherry blossoms. In the next section, this essay will closely examine the four songs' lyrics and investigate the sentimentalism associated with the idea of changes and transitions.

3. Song Analysis

a) Sakurazaka by Fukuyama Masaharu

In the first verse of *Sakurazaka*, which follows the initial chorus at the very beginning, Fukuyama illustrates the landscape he is looking at: 'The pink resembles sadness' (*悲しみに似た薄紅色*) indicates that a heart-breaking event happened to him, and he is remembering the tragedy as he is looking at pink petals of cherry blossoms. In the following lines, he explains the reason for his heartbreak.

揺れる木漏れ日 薫る桜坂

悲しみに似た 薄紅色

Wavering sunlight, coming through leaves,

Fragrant Sakurazaka

The pink resembles sadness

君がいた 恋をしていた

君じゃなきゃダメなのに

ひとつになれず

There you were.

I was in love.

There was no one but you,

But we could not be together as one.

(Fukuyama, 2000 Translated by the author)

'There was no one but you, but we could not be together as one' (*君じゃなきゃダメなのに ひとつになれず*) explains the fact that the protagonist found passionate feelings of love, but the two lovebirds could not be together. The second chorus follows, bringing forth a noticeable contrast between the changing seasons and his sweet memory of love that has not changed.

愛と知っていたのに

春はやってくるのに

Woo Yeah 夢は今も 夢のままで

Although I knew it was love,

Although spring comes,

Woo, yeah, the dream is still a dream.

(Fukuyama, 2000 Translated by the author)

The first two lines of this second chorus, 'although I knew it was love, although spring comes' (*愛と知っていたのに 春はやってくるのに*), illustrate his sense of regret marked by *noni*, which indicates the contradiction between his expectations and the reality. He felt that it was a significant romance, unstoppable as the spring coming, yet unlike the spring, it could not be achieved, just like a dream. The poetic persona seems to have two dreams: the first dream refers to his romantic feelings or his memory of romance; the second dream can be equally interpreted as a beautiful memory and as an unachievable goal. To put it another way, he is taking his memory as either an object of his sweet nostalgia or his romantic love that is still unachievable. Either way, we can find a stark contrast between the beautiful 'spring,' which is coming towards him, and the beautiful 'dream,' which is either lost, unachievable or moving away from him.

In the bridge following the third chorus, there is a clear reference to the change of the seasons.

逢えないけど

季節は変わるけど

愛しき人

Although we cannot see each other,

Although the seasons change,

My dear,

君だけが わかってくれた

憧れを追いかけて

僕は生きるよ

You were the only one who understood me.

Chasing my yearning,

I will live my life.

(Fukuyama, 2000 Translated by the author)

'Although we cannot see each other, although the seasons change, my dear' (*逢えないけど季節は変わるけど 愛しき人*) indicates that the seasons keep turning without him being able to meet with his love. Then, one can take the last line, 'Chasing my yearning, I will live my life' (*憧れを追いかけて僕は生きるよ*), as the declaration of his decision to move on. Without meeting the real 'you,' he decided to keep going on with his life, embracing the beautiful image of her represented by the word 'yearning' (*akogare*). Here, we can see the strong contrast between spring as a symbol of something that keeps changing and the image or dream of his 'dear' (*itoshiki hito*), which stays the same despite the passage of time.

Although he depicts the image of his lover in his mind using multiple different words: 'dream' (*yume*), 'you' (*kimi*), 'dear' (*itoshiki hito*), 'yearning' (*akogare*), and 'love' (*ai*), each word illustrates unchanging romantic feelings which function in contrast with the change of the seasons. The contrast between changing seasons and this unchanged love indicates that even if time goes by without meeting with his love, the protagonist continues to embrace his romantic feelings. Here, the fact that he does not know if he will accomplish the romance, and more importantly, his will to keep his candid and sincere love despite the uncertainty, creates a tinge of sentimentalism.

b) Sakura no Toki by aiko

The two verses of *Sakurano Toki* explain the romance which the female protagonist is going through. These verses function as context setups. The first verse reveals that she is currently experiencing the joy of romance. The line, 'I feel that meeting with you made everything' (*あなたと逢えたことで全て報われた気がするよ*), explains her uplifting feeling. The first reference to 'spring' and 'sakura' appears in the pre-chorus.

「春が来るとこの川辺は桜がめいっぱい咲き乱れるんだ」

あなたは言うあたしはうなずく

'When spring comes, this riverside will have cherry blossoms blooming in profusion.'

You say, and I nod.

(aiko, 2000 Translated by the author)

These two lines illustrate the landscape they are looking at. By her boyfriend's words, the protagonist perhaps imagines the riverside with cherry blossoms in full bloom. The second line of the pre-chorus depicts the harmonious couple looking at the river and picturing the coming spring. The song's mood is filled with joyful and colourful feelings of love. This cheery mood remains the same throughout the first chorus. In the first chorus's third and fourth lines, we find her wishing that their love will continue through time: 'slowly, slowly, we transcend time / I wish it is you who I will share another happy kiss with' (*ゆっくりゆっくり時間を超えてまた違う幸せなキスをするのがあなたであるように*).

In the second verse, the mood has changed. Now the protagonist is feeling anxious about losing her boyfriend's love.

今まであたしが覚えてきた 掌の言葉じゃ足りない程

伝えきれない愛しさに 歯がゆくてむなしくて苦しいよ

まぶたの上にきれいな青 薄い唇に紅をひく

色づいたあたしを無意味な物にしないで

The words I learned,

the handy, easy words, are not enough.

I cannot convey my love to you enough.

It makes me impatient, feel useless, and then I suffer.

Beautiful blue on my eyelids,

and I draw rouge on my thin lips.

Now I wear these colours.

Please, do not make me meaningless.

(aiko, 2000 Translated by the author)

The first two lines depict the protagonist's frustrated feelings caused by her inability to find the proper words to convey her romantic feelings towards her love; this frustration results in the anxiety of losing him. She puts makeup on her face and then says the

poignant line: 'Now I wear these colours / Please, do not make me.' This line gives us a vivid impression of her fear of losing him. *Iro* means colours, but it is also used to describe sexiness and to allude to sexuality in the Japanese language: thus, as she is wearing the colour of sexiness, she is scared that she, painted with *iro*, might become meaningless by not being desired by her love.

The second chorus has a more direct reference to the transitions of the seasons.

気まぐれにじらした薬指も慣れたその手も

あたしの心と全てを動かし掴んで離さないもの

限りない日々と巡り巡る季節の中で

いつも微笑んでいられる二人であるように

Your capricious ring finger, your skilled hand

Something grabs and moves my heart and everything and never let me go

In the endless days and turning seasons,

I wish we would always be smiling together as two.

(aiko, 2000 Translated by the author)

Here, we can see her central message: she wishes her happiness to continue throughout 'the endless days and turning seasons.' In the bridge part that follows this second chorus, she repeats this wish with an even more robust tone.

春が終わり夏が訪れ 桜の花びらが朽ち果てても

今日とかわらずあたしを愛して

Even when spring ends, summer comes, and petals of cherry decay.

Please keep loving me, like you do today.

(aiko, 2000 Translated by the author)

Kuchi hateru, which means to decay in Japanese, creates an impactful and heavy image of desolation. The petals of cherry blossoms could be a trope of her beauty or a sweet feeling of youthful romance. Even the beauty of these petals fades away with the transition of time, and she asks that he continue to love her in the same manner, regardless of the seasonal changes.

Like *Sakurazaka*, *Sakura no Toki* treats spring and cherry blossoms as a symbol of temporal transition. However, the object of comparison is their love going forward instead of the sweet memory of the past, which is featured in Fukuyama's song. This strong feeling of her romance and her wish for unchanging love creates a sentimental feeling in

contrast with the decaying beauty of the petals of the cherry, which implies losing her beauty or her youthful romance.

c) *Sakura* by Ketsumeishi

The third example, Ketsumeishi's *Sakura*, has a similar theme to Fukuyama's *Sakurazaka*. In this song, Ketsumeishi illustrates a recurring spring that triggers the memory of his girlfriend in the protagonist's mind. It starts with the chorus:

さくら舞い散る中に忘れた記憶と

君の声が戻ってくる

吹き止まない春の風 あの頃のままで

君が風に舞う髪かき分けた時の

淡い香り戻ってくる

二人約束した

あの頃のままで

In scattering flowers,

the forgotten memory

and your voice come back.

The restless spring wind

remains the same as those days.

The scent of you, parting your hair,

That faint scent comes back.

It remains the same as those days,

The days we made the promise.

(Ketsumeishi, 2005, Translated by the author)

From the very first line, we can see the scattering flowers function as a trigger of the poetic persona's memory, which evokes his lover's voice. The difference from Fukuyama's *Sakurazaka* is that Ketsumeishi takes spring as a recurring season that has the 'spring wind' (*haru no kaze*), which 'remains the same as those days' (*ano koro no mama*). Then the scattering flowers and the spring wind remind him of the faint scent of her hair, which is also 'the same as those days.' The protagonist of Ketsumeishi's *Sakura*, intoxicated by scattering flowers, immerses himself in his dream of "forgotten memory," in which everything remains the same, including both of the two humans and the season. This makes a good contrast with Fukuyama's protagonist, who sees changing seasons as reiterations of his unchanging love, and Aiko's protagonist, who goes through changes

of the seasons, imagines the changes in her future, and wishes her boyfriend's love remains the same.

At the end of the first rap section, we can see some staple topics introduced in the web articles related to changes and transitions in one's life: 'encountering' (*deai*), 'parting' (*wakare*), and 'unchanged' (*kawaranu*). Again, these keywords represent changes and transitions that are strongly associated with spring and cherry blossoms. Here, one can see a case-in-point example of the association.

さくら散る頃 出会い別れ

それでも ここまだ変わらぬままで

咲かした芽 君 離した手

いつしか別れ 交したね

さくら舞う季節に取り戻す

あの頃 そして君呼び起こす

Around the time of scattering cherry,

We met, we parted.

Still, here is the same.

We sprout the bud,

You let my hands go.

Before we knew it, we had already said goodbye to each other.

I retrieve it in the season of whirling cherry.

Those days, and you, I recall.

(Ketsumeishi, 2005 Translated by the author)

The protagonist's romantic relationship with his love ended in the late spring, a time of scattering cherry petals. One can see that from 'around the time of scattering cherry, we met, we parted.' They saw their love was sprouting, but she let his hand go, and they exchanged the words of parting with each other. However, in the spring season, the memory of 'you' comes back with the scattering flowers, as the scenery of the scattering cherries is infused with the memory of his love. Then it flows into a refrain phase:

花びら舞い散る

記憶舞い戻る

Petals, whirling, scattering.

Memories, whirling, returning.

(Ketsumeishi, 2005 Translated by the author)

In these lines, we can see that the scattered flowers evoke the memory of romance in the protagonist's mind. At the very end of the song, the group repeats these lines six times and sings the first line of the refrain phrase once more. The two-line refrain follows another refrain phrase, '*hyrurīra*,' which is an uncommon, and hence memorable, onomatopoeia that evokes the sound of petals whirling in the winds. The onomatopoeia is repeated seven times, the same as after the first chorus. The repetition of onomatopoeia at this point anchors the image of scattering flowers and the spring wind. Eventually, over this vivid image of petals of cherry whirling in the spring wind, the following two-line phrase introduced above enhances the song's central theme: nostalgia towards the romantic memory evoked by the scattering flowers. Here, we can see the image of sakura used to trigger the beautiful memory of 'you' in the protagonist's mind, although the romance in the real world has already disappeared.

d) Sakura (dokushō) by Moriyama Naotaro

As mentioned previously, Moriyama's *Sakura (dokushō)* has a strong association with graduation (*sotsugyō*). The lyrics are filled with a cheerful message to friends who are moving forward with their lives, departing from the friendship they cultivated during their days in school. Even from the very beginning of the song, the lyrics depict a joyful friendship shared among the protagonists and its celebratory mood:

どんなに苦しい時も 君は笑っているから

挫けそうになりかけても

頑張れる気がしたよ

No matter how hard it was, you were smiling

Even when I almost gave up,

Your smile made me feel like I could do it.

Then the pre-chorus comes in. There is no clue related to what precisely is blurring the protagonist's landscape. It might be spring fog, petals of cherry blossoms, or just a metaphor of the departure implied by graduation, as the landscape is fading away. Whatever it is, he starts hearing the song from the days in the past. Even though the key theme is departure rather than nostalgia, we have a subtle hint of nostalgia here as well.

霞みゆく景色の中に

あの日の唄が聴こえる

In the landscape fading away,

I heard the song from those days.

(Moriyama, 2003 Translated by the author)

This sense of nostalgia somewhat resonates with the other three songs investigated so far, being correlated to changes and transitions in life as well as the inexorability of time. The protagonist, who is departing from his school days, simultaneously looks at the future and the past with nostalgia. Then, the song flows into the chorus that has graduation and departure as its central theme.

さくら さくら 今、咲き誇る

刹那に散りゆく運命と知って

さらば友よ 旅立ちの刻 変わらないその想いを 今

Sakura Sakura,

Now, you are in full bloom,

knowing that you will be scattered in a blink.

Farewell, my friend.

Now it is time to set off on a journey.

Now, the unchanged feeling...

(Moriyama, 2003 Translated by the author)

'Knowing that you will be scattered in a blink' suggests the short life of cherry blossoms. This could be a trope of foreseeable and inevitable changes in humans' lives, more specifically, the day of graduation coming up in the protagonist's life. 'Farewell, my friend' (*saraba tomo yo*) and 'time to set off on a journey (*tabidachi no toki*) are the staple words of graduation, often seen in the message read out by high school students in graduation ceremonies. 'Unchanged feelings' (*kawaranai omoi*) could be an affection for his friends mentioned in the same line. Focusing on 'Unchanged,' we can find a suggestion of the contrast between changed things and unchanged feelings, which we have encountered in the other three songs; however, the symbolism gets a little more complicated in the current example: while the cherry blossoms still symbolize changes and transitions, in contrast to the other songs, the change occurring to this protagonist's case is a certainty approaching, while the protagonists in the previous case-studies solely imagined or expected changes, vaguely at best. Nevertheless, at the same time, the poetic persona's wish for their continuous friendship is also here, like Fukuyama's and Ketsumeish's memory and Aiko's wish for enduring warm feelings. He certainly knows that the friendship will not remain completely unchanged, but he still carries his sincere wish for the continuation of their friendship.

The second chorus and the last chorus depict a stark contrast:

さくら さくら ただ舞い落ちる

いつか生まれ変わる瞬間を信じ

泣くな友よ 今惜別の時 飾らないあの笑顔で さあ

Sakura sakura,

It is just whirling down,

believing in the moment of rebirth.

Do not cry, my friend.

Now, it is time for a sad parting.

Here, with your earnest smile.

さくら さくら いざ舞い上がれ

永遠にさんざめく光を浴びて

さらば友よ またこの場所で会おう

さくら舞い散る道の上で

Sakura sakura,

Now, whirl up in the air!

Basking in the eternal cheerful lights.

Farewell, my friend.

Let's meet up again in this place,

on the road of scattering flowers.

(Moriyama, 2003 Translated by the author)

The mood of the third chorus is driven by the sorrow of his separation from his friends. 'Do not cry, my friend,' and 'now, it is time for a sad parting' capture this feeling. In the last chorus, one can observe the protagonist's positive hope towards the future while he wishes to see his friends again in the same place. The parallel between 'It is just whirling down' (*tada mai ochiru*) and 'Now, whirl up in the air!' (*iza maiagare*) depicts the difference in the mood of the two choruses. Both sorrow and hope are present at this significant turning point in the protagonist's life: graduation. The big change in front of the protagonist causes these two conflicting emotions.

Graduation and cherry blossoms are both associated with transitions and changes. The former is of human life, and the latter is of the seasons. The idea of departure from one's friends and a big change in one's life triggers sentimentalism. The sadness of separation from his school friends is turned into the emotional climax of the song, being enhanced by the protagonist's wish for continuous unity and friendship with his school friends, as they know that they will be physically separated soon. In other words, this emotional climax is inextricably related to the warm emotions towards their friendship, which will be lost, or at least cannot remain the same. The protagonist, his friends, and the listeners of the song all know that the separation and potential dissolution of the friendship and other big inevitable changes await them. They have mixed emotions towards change, as all humans do: the wish for friendship to remain the same, which is impossible and they know it, and the brilliant hope towards the future. This hopeful gaze towards the future against the backdrop of mixed emotions heightens the sentimental mood.

4. Conclusion: The Function of the Sakura images

This essay has explored the lyrics of four song examples, two of which mark the beginning of the Sakura Song Boom, and two of which were widely marketed and circulated during and after the peak of the boom in the early 2020s. In this conclusion section, this essay will explore a common characteristic, namely, sweet sentimentalism, in the four songs that have been collectively categorised as songs of the Sakura Song Boom in the 2000s. Subsequently, this essay will investigate the functions of the image of cherry blossoms in the narrative of supposed Japaneseness in the two articles and the establishment of collective identity among consumers and distributors of these songs and articles.

Indeed, the common element shared by all four songs is the symbolism of transitions and changes in one's life, encompassed in the imagery of the cherry blossoms, which reportedly have a very short life cycle. In addition, all four songs have a deeply entrenched sentimentality. Sakura, as a symbol of transitions and changes in one's life, functions like a mirror to reflect something else in the human world. Sometimes it can be an unchanged romantic memory, sometimes it can be a wish for continuous love, and sometimes it can be a wish for the future and an unchanging friendship. In this regard, another remarkable thing is that all these wishes are rooted in positive and sweet feelings: a sweet memory of love, a wish for a sweet future with their unceasing love, and a fun and sweet memory with school friends. As the cherry blossom shows changes by scattering and recurring, the perishable beauty of flowers represents the ephemerality of sweet feeling, which protagonists of these songs wish to continue. This triggers sentimental emotions, as the image of the cherry hints at the changes that they fear. In other words, they are all facing these sweet, unchanged feelings-or wishes—with the conceivable bitterness of losing them.

The cherry blossoms, which are imbued with sweet sentimentalism, are similar to what Sara Ahmed calls 'Happy Objects.' She explains, 'Certain objects become imbued with positive affect as good objects' (2010, p. 34). She explains the role of habits in the argument about happiness: 'It is not only that we acquire good taste through habits; rather, the association between objects and affects is preserved through habit' (2010, p. 35). The creation and consumption of Sakura Songs can be this 'habit.' Popular songs are surely not the sole preservers of the image of sweet sentimentalism associated with cherry blossoms. However, one can assert that Sakura Songs created in the boom in the 2000s shared the sweet sentimentalism as the collective view of emotions associated with cherry blossoms. Ahmed mentions sharing 'an orientation' toward objects: '[W]hen happy objects are passed around, it is not necessarily the feeling that passes. To share such objects (or have a share in such objects) would simply mean you would share an orientation towards those objects as being good (2010, pp. 37-38). This argument might help us consider what was happening during the Sakura Song Boom: the songs shared not only the object, namely the imagery of cherry blossoms, but also the orientation towards those cherry blossoms as a trigger of sweet sentimentalism.

The marketing and advertising of the Sakura Songs, at least the two articles this essay introduced, draw a facile connection between cherry blossoms and the supposed common identity of the Japanese people. *Raitā* of *Oricon* and *Ongaku Natarī*, both of which are leading companies providing information about Japanese pop music to their audiences, simplistically associate the Sakura Song Boom with their desired image of Japan, its people, and their identity.

> *There have not been any other examples of making this many songs with one motif representing a season. I believe, as long as Japan has the seasons, as long as we have the sensibility to feel something with seasons, Sakura Songs will never go away* (O.D.A, 2019 , translated by the author)

> *Regarding its sales, the popularity of Sakura Songs is very stable, but why do they keep captivating the hearts of the Japanese? After all, it is the beauty of cherry blossoms that entertains us from the beginning of the bloom to the time of scattering, days and nights, from moment to moment* (Oricon, 2013, p. Translated by the author).

Oricon even mentions a fundamental piece of Japanese classical literature, *The Tale of Genji*, and the first imperial anthology of waka poems, *Kokinwakashū*.

> *People started to be attracted to cherry blossoms in the Heian period. It shows up in books that grand historical figures have left, such as Kokinwakashū and The Tale of Genji. We are familiar with the image of sakura as a seasonal word in haiku. Transcending time, its beauty has attracted many people and has stimulated viewers' sensibility. As to the familiarity, the Japanese currency and coins' designs with sakura might be great evidence.* (Oricon, 2013, p. Translated by the author)

Here, we can see an aspect of Christine Marran's 'biotrope' mentioned in the introduction of this essay. One can sense the praise of Japaneseness, which is illogically associated with the images of cherry blossoms and the seasons embedded in these writings. Nonetheless, although the two web articles connect Japan and sakura, and *Oricon* even mentions classic literary examples, they do not detail that connection itself in any reasonable or theoretical way. These articles rely on simple but ambiguous words such as 'beauty' of cherry blossoms and 'sensibility' to perceive their beauty, which is simply acknowledged as unique to the Japanese. In other words, they build on the power of 'biotrope.' They feature the image of the Japanese as people who love cherry blossoms, and they believe that the Japanese have a particular sensibility to feel beauty especially. One thing we should not forget about is that, as was mentioned earlier in the essay, although tropes of sakura have surely existed in the world of pre-modern literature, the association between the image of cherry blossoms and the collective idea of *Japaneseness* is a Meiji invention, according to Nakamoto.

Nakamoto argues that ideas such as 'cherry blossoms, which the Japanese have loved since ancient times' make people imagine the existence of the nation and its people, which putatively transcends time. Also, the existence of 'the same' *someiyoshino* across the nation makes people imagine the entity of the 'people' who 'share the same space.' The size of this 'space' decreased after Japan's defeat in the war, and cherry blossoms were planted again with new connotations such as 'peace' and 'requiem' for the people who had died in the war. Then, she argues that the boom of 'Sakura Songs' in the 2000s occurred in the global trend of nationalism, which was a reaction to the intense globalization, and at the same time, more importantly, had roots in the image of the cherry blossoms that was disseminated both in the pre-war time and during the war (2023, p. 497). The facile connection between the cherry blossoms and supposed Japaneseness in the two articles is a case-in-point example of the putative image of the people of the nation, which is associated with the nationalistic connotation of the flower.

These two major companies' circulation of the image of the Japanese who love sakura, which lacks empirical reasoning, also has a self-orientalising aspect. In his groundbreaking *Orientalism*, Said discusses the orientalist attitude.

> *"shares with magic and with mythology the self-containing, the self-reinforcing character of a closed system, in which objects are what they are because they are what they are, for once, for all time, for ontological reasons that no empirical material can either dislodge or alter"* (Said, 2003, p. 93).

The association between the image of *sakura* and *Japaneseness* does not require logic to reinforce its legitimacy. The two articles affirm this association just because 'they are what they are.'

This facile connection and self-orientalising image in conveying the idea of Japaneseness are bolstered with 'sensibility', supposedly typical of the Japanese people, which enables them to feel strong emotions such as the sweet sentimentalism evoked by the Sakura Songs. In this regard, sweet sentimentalism, as a criterion of granted *Japaneseness,* plays a significant role in the affirmation of the facile connection and the self-orientalism.

Moreover, sweet sentimentalism functions to connect people in the imagined community, which is commonly conceived among the consumers and distributors of this kind of information. Both web articles take the connection between Sakura Songs and *Japaneseness* for granted. Other than an unreasonable link with classic literature, how do they find the collective identities of Japanese people in the image of *sakura* and Sakura Songs? I argue that the consumption of Sakura Songs disseminates the sweet and sentimental 'orientation' towards the object, as Ahmed says.

Furthermore, the consumption and advertisement themselves establish collective identities among the people who listen to and circulate the songs. David Leheny draws a connection between 'common performances of emotions' and 'collective identity.' This idea of 'collective identity' might help us to understand the two articles. As he considers the establishment of 'collective identities,' Leheny says:

> *"These identities might be reinforced or recognised by common performances of emotion—the rending of garments, ululation at weddings and funerals, enraged burning of a foreign-owned store during a demonstration or riot—but even these expressions would likely conceal the great range of feelings and experiences of the participants themselves."* (Leheny, 2018, p. 10).

The creation and consumption of those songs could be an example of these 'common performances of emotion.' Consuming sentimental songs collectively categorized as Sakura Songs, which get largely featured by media in a certain time of the year, singing these songs in karaoke in the season of cherry blossoms, or learning lyrics and songs and singing together with one's school friends at graduation ceremonies can be considered ways of reinforcing collective identities. These are participatory ritualist celebrations of the creation and reinforcement of collective emotions.

Leheny introduces Ken Ito's study on Japanese melodramatic literature:

> *"In his study of Japanese melodramatic literature, Ken Ito notes how often his students point to overriding sentimentalism in much of Japanese popular culture, and indeed one could, for example, produce a lengthy YouTube montage of Japanese film scenes of characters running, crying, and waving to their friends or loved ones seated in departing trains."* (Leheny, 2018, p. 10).

We can find this 'overriding sentimentalism' in those four Sakura Songs. Like the conceivable YouTube montage mentioned in the quote, one could easily produce a playlist of sentimental Sakura Songs from the 2000s that have sweet sentimentalism as a central theme. If, as Leheny argues, a common practice of emotions reinforces collective identities among the people who share the practice, Sakura Songs in the boom in the 2000s reinforced the collective identities among consumers. Moreover, their circulations, the number of sales that made these songs national-level hits, and the recurrence of the two songs in the early 2020s show that a significant amount listeners of Japanese pop music in the 2020s engage in some way with these common performances of emotions. In other words, the shared orientation towards sakura in the songs involved with sweet sentimentalism creates and maintains collective identities among the massive number of consumers and listeners of Japanese pop music.

Although these four songs do not display self-orientalising aspects in themselves, as detailed in the two web articles, when the songs are collectively categorised with the generic term 'Sakura Song,' they can be employed in the advertisement of the self-orientalising image of the Japanese people who love cherry blossoms. This love towards cherry blossoms, which is discussed as particular to Japanese people by the web articles, is inextricably connected with the 'sensibility' to feel the sentimental emotions which occur to supposed Japanese people when they listen to a Sakura Song. The two articles link this sensibility to *Japaneseness.* Here, we can see their image of *Japaneseness* represented by cherry blossoms. The Sakura Songs' sweet sentimentalism functions as a cohesive bond among the supposed 'Japanese.'

Lastly, this association between seasonal objects and particular themes, such as sentimental emotions in this essay's case, has been commonly practised in Japanese literary

culture. In his book called *Japan and the Culture of the Four Seasons*, Haruo Shirane explores seasonal associations of objects and themes. According to him, seasonal topics developed a specific set of cultural associations, and nature became 'the primary vehicle for expressing private emotions' (Shirane, 2012, p. 19). He then argues that, in the modern day and especially in urban settings, 'nature may be far away.' He says, 'The average company employee probably encounters little nature or even natural sunlight in the day.' Shirane continues, 'although nature may be far away, it is relived or recaptured in the cultural imagination.' This cultural imagination has been 'a key means of social communication' in Japan, according to Shirane:

> *"The diminished representation of nature and the seasons in contemporary Japan, however, does not lessen their enormous impact across more than a thousand years of Japanese cultural history, not only in poetry, painting, and the traditional arts but also in a wide range of media, from architecture to fashion. As we have seen, natural imagery in poetry provided a key means of social communication from as early as the seventh century, and representations of nature and the seasons became an important channel of aesthetic, religious, and political expression in the subsequent centuries."* (Shirane, 2012, p. 218).

The sweet sentimentalism associated with the Sakura Songs themselves can be a noteworthy contemporary example of what Shirane calls 'the highly encoded system of seasonal representation.' By not simply associating the image of cherry blossoms and seasonality with the sense of *Japaneseness,* such as in the two web articles, but instead carefully analysing the image and connotations associated with seasonal objects in contemporary Japanese culture, one can obtain a lens to see the cultural milieu of 'the highly encoded system of seasonal representation.' As I believe that cases of seasonal representation in contemporary Japanese society are a fruitful and promising research field due to significant dissemination and consumption thereof in quotidian life, I hope this study can contribute to greater research related to seasonality and the view of nature in contemporary Japanese consumer culture.

In summary, the Sakura Song Boom that occurred in the 2000s has roots in the nationalistic association between the image of cherry blossoms and *Japaneseness* established in the Meiji period, as noted by Nakamoto. The two articles this essay has investigated have an unmistakable tinge of this nationalism, as these articles make a facile connection between cherry blossoms and the image of the Japanese. As can be seen in the four examples this essay provided, many of the songs released during the boom are infused with sweet sentimentalism. This sweet sentimentalism reinforces the nationalism based on the supposed *Japaneseness* visible in the two web articles, because the sensibility to perceive such sentimentalism is regarded as a trait traditionally inherited by generations of the Japanese that belongs exclusively to them. Moreover, as a commonly performed emotion, sweet sentimentalism also functions as a cohesive bond of commonly conceived 'Japanese', the image of which is shared among consumers and distributors of the nationalistic connotation of *sakura* featured in the two articles.

Investigating the image of cherry blossoms provided by these commercial articles is crucial to scrutinising the perception of these songs and the boom itself. As repeatedly mentioned before, according to Stevens, the storytellers of these narratives of *Japaneseness* are the 'real arbiters of taste.' These can be the puppeteers in the shadows who handle the songs and circulate the nationalism scented with the fragrance of cherry blossoms and coloured with a tinge of sweet sentimentalism.

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RESEARCH PAPER

A Living Space Under the Sign of the Rhythms of Nature: Kyoto in The Old Capital by Kawabata Yasunari

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Abstract: Yasunari Kawabata's The Old Capital offers a profound meditation on the relationship between nature, tradition, and the human spirit. Set in Kyoto, the novel transforms the city into a symbolic and aesthetic landscape through which themes of impermanence, seasonal rhythm, and cultural identity are explored. The present study tries to emphasize the way in which, out of the desire to lament the loss of tradition, in his novel whose original title is *Koto*, Yasunari Kawabata creates an idealized image of the old imperial capital, giving it the value of a keeper of the most authentic values of the Japanese ethos as well as that of a symbol of aesthetic concepts such as mono no aware, the fleeting beauty, wabi sabi, the rustic, imperfect and desolate beauty, or ma, the beauty of the empty space, which were generated by a deep awareness of the transient beauty of nature. The vegetal element that perhaps best characterizes the Japanese identity always tried hard by the forces of nature occupies a central place in Kawabata's novel, encompassing its traditional meanings as a symbol of renewal, but also that of the impermanence of beauty and fragility of life. By analysing key motifs such as seasonal festivals, natural imagery, and spatial motifs, this paper argues that tradition in The Old Capital is not portrayed as rigid or static. Rather, it emerges as a fluid and evolving presence, continuously reinterpreted through individual memory by the novel's characters acting like true keepers of tradition. It also puts forward an interpretation that aligns with Rodica Frentiu's analysis of Kawabata's poetic sensibility, where nature, seasonality, and the aesthetics of impermanence become part of a lived experience rather than abstract symbolism.

Keywords: *Kawabata; Kyoto; seasonal imagery; natural elements; Japanese aesthetics*

Published in 1962, Yasunari Kawabata's The Old Capital (*Koto*) presents a lyrical meditation on traditional Japanese aesthetics through the shifting seasons of Kyoto—a city where the impermanence of beauty, emotional ambiguity, and the quiet dialogue between nature and identity converge. This paper explores how Kawabata constructs a literary Kyoto that oscillates between fiction and reality, transforming the city into a symbolic space for articulating traditional Japanese aesthetics. Through close analysis, it examines how concepts such as *mono no aware* (the pathos of things), *ma* (the meaningful pause or spatial interval), and the symbolic relationship between humans and the natural world are woven into the narrative text of The Old Capital.

The study also seeks to demonstrate how the seasonal rhythm of the novel structures both the narrative and the emotional development of the characters, with each season marking shifts in perception, identity and interpersonal relationships. Moreover, it investigates how Kawabata reimagines traditional customs, especially festivals and rituals, not as static remnants of the past but as evolving practices shaped by individual memory and collective experience. From this perspective, Kawabata's Kyoto emerges not merely as a physical setting but as a literary and spiritual landscape where tradition and modernity coexist in delicate balance.

Time and space are ambiguous and complex concepts, but also crucial for the study of any culture and society. Each culture constructs its own temporality and territoriality. Time and space in Japan are considered to be in a permanent relationship, forming an indissoluble whole. In order to point out the fundamental difference in the perception of space in the West and in Japan, the philosopher and orientalist Augustin Berque brings into focus the concept of *ma*, which reflects not just a different aesthetic, but a fundamentally different 'way of being in the world' ("*avoir le «sens du ma », c'est vivre un autre espace-temps*") (Berque & Sauzet, 2004, p. 33). Analysing the way in which the Japanese conception integrates the human being in his habitat, in the smallest physical and symbolic detail, creating a link with an existential ideal, Berque considers that the notion of *ma*, would embody 'a concrete and singular relationship in space-time, as opposed to those universal abstractions that space and time' have become for the Occidental thought (Berque, 2016 [2015], pp. 16-17). At the same time, as an expression of space, *ma* can mean space itself, the dimension of a space, a unit of space, or the space between two things, while as an expression of time, ma means time itself, the interval between two events, rhythm, or timing (Komparu, 1983 [1980], p. 70). Marked by versatility, the notion of *ma* may also define an existence that connects a presence, a transitory phenomenon, a relationship between temporality and spatiality, a space-time, which implies the simultaneous awareness of the form and the space around it, so that the space is perceived as 'identical with the event or phenomena occurring in it and recognized only in its relation to time-flow' (Isozaki, 1979, p. 13). In other words, various performances have been considered 'to manifest themselves in concrete forms' within the space-time continuum (Suizu, 1984, p. 1). Moreover, within Japanese philosophical tradition reality is conceived, consequently, as an uninterrupted sequence of causally linked, ephemeral phenomena. The notion that most clearly reveals that everything ceases to exist the very moment it comes into being, making all things inherently fleeting is a foundational concept in Buddhism, *mujo*, often translated as 'impermanence', 'transience' or 'momentariness' (Takeuchi, 2015, pp. 10-12). Both traditional and modern Japanese contexts, are profoundly shaped by the aesthetic and philosophical awareness of transience.

Commenting on the concept of *fūdo*, advanced by the Japanese philosopher Tetsuro Watsugi, A. Berque considers that this concept emphasizes the relationship between the characteristics of human societies and the natural conditions of their environment, especially the climate. However, Watsuji himself stated that his work is not only about the influence of the natural environment on human life and that this notion defines the Japanese identity by highlighting the fact that there is a reciprocity of influence from man to the environment and from the environment to the human being which allows the continuous evolution of both, *fūdo* representing "the entire interconnected web of influences that together create the attitudes and values of an entire people" (Berque, 1982, p. 498).

At the same time, the traditional Japanese conception of nature, as embodied by the *kami*—the deities or spirits of Shinto belief—differs fundamentally from the dominant Western worldview. In Japanese thought, nature is an active, sacred presence, animated by the kami and intimately connected to everyday life and religious practice. As Thomas Kasulis states, in Shinto, nature does not represent a passive background but rather "the medium through which the sacred reveals itself" (Kasulis, 2004, p. 89). Trees, rivers, rocks, and mountains are often considered sites of divine presence, and thus demand reverence rather than domination. Nature has, in Japanese mythology, an ambivalent character, being at the same time a realm of beauty, but also the realm of change and of decay. Since the Heian era, there has been a special interest in the natural world. Literature and art have consistently celebrated its fleeting qualities, and seasonal change became a central organizing principle in both poetry and courtly rituals, giving rise to a special sensitivity towards nature that continues to influence Japanese aesthetics today (Shirane, 2012, pp. 20-22). In Japanese Aesthetics and Culture, Donald Keene describes how this profound attentiveness to nature's ephemerality gave rise to aesthetic concepts such as *mono no aware*, *wabi-sabi*, and *yūgen* (Keene, 2004). *Mono no aware*, or 'the pathos of things,' refers to the gentle sadness or awareness in front of the transience of life,

often symbolized by falling cherry blossoms. *Wabi-sabi* celebrates the beauty of imperfection, impermanence, and simplicity, while *yūgen* refers to the subtle and mysterious aspects of beauty that cannot be fully articulated, evoking depth and emotional resonance (Hume, 1995). As Keene observes that these aren't just intellectual ideas, but also emotional, even spiritual responses of a culture deeply attuned to the cycles of nature.

In his novel, *The Old Capital*, in which the action takes place in the city of Kyoto, where the characters live, move, following the natural rhythm of the changing seasons, Kawabata builds the image of the city between fiction and reality, his literary representation focusing on three specific characteristics: nature, seasons and festivals.

By discussing the literary text, the following analysis attempts to explore how the image of Kyoto is recomposed by describing nature and seasons, gardens, temples or festivals and identify how typical characters stand for a typical way of living in the world, under the sign of a permanent change of things and also embody the reciprocity of influence from man to the environment and from the environment to the human being.

Yasunari Kawabata's prose reflects this feeling of being one with nature, which encourages a return to the essence of existence; a feeling that simultaneously offers opportunities for isolation, but also for opening up to the world, to the beauties of nature. By picturing this human-nature interdependence, the Japanese author succeeds in praising the traditional Japanese way of life and at the same time raising it to the level of universality.

Nevertheless, the exterior spaces described in the novel are mostly natural ones. From the descriptions that abound in the text, the real geography of the city of Kyoto is configured. The mountains, forests and rivers that cross the city are constantly related to the unfolding events and involved in the characters' lives.

In The Old Capital, the temples and shrines dispersed all over the city of Kyoto appear frequently mentioned and they represent landmarks in the trajectories of the characters throughout the book. Equally, numerous references are to be found referring to the festivals that take place in Kyoto in all seasons. As the author himself writes: "It can be said, without any exaggeration, that in Kyoto in the many Buddhist temples and ancient Shinto shrines almost every day a small or large celebration takes place" (Kawabata, 2006, p. 69).

The first description of such a ceremony that appears in the novel is that of *Aoi Matsuri*, held in the middle of May, the Festival of Mallows, an ancient prayer ritual for rich harvests that was taken over by the Imperial Court when the capital was moved to Heiankyo and has been held ever since at Kamo, Kamigano and Shimogano shrines. Kawabata describes its history and the changes this ceremony has undergone over time. The description of the celebration appears in the chapter "Kitayama Cedars" (Kawabata, 2009, p. 69) but its chronotropic valences are amplified in other chapters by the references to the characters' relationships, the justification of their non-participation due to the weather and the recollection of the years when they were there to admire the procession.

However, the most extensive description of a festival in the novel is that of *Gion Matsuri* to which Kawabata dedicates an entire chapter with the same title. Appeared in the 9th century after a plague epidemic, the festival began as a purification ritual meant to calm down the destructive forces of vengeful gods that cause fires, earthquakes or floods (Nenzi, 2015, p. 46). The festivities last throughout July and include purification rituals by fire or water, such as *hikoshiraiai*, the washing of allegorical chariots in the Kamo River near the Great Sijo Bridge, prayers at Buddhist shrines or Shinto shrines and processions of illuminated chariots in the sound of traditional music, *hayashi* (Shirane, 2012, p. 64).

Kawabata confers it special values in the relationship with the main characters of the book. For them the Gion celebration is at the same time, a space and a time of identity recovery, of rediscovery, but also one of confusion, of illusion. This is where the meeting

of the twin sisters, Chieko and Naeko, takes place, where they recognize each other and at the same time where Hideo mistakes their identity.

Like any city depicted in the pages of a fiction, Kawabata's Kyoto is transformed, transfigured from the moment it is narratively reconstructed. Its literary image is not a literal transcription of reality, but an allegorical or symbolic representation of it through which the writer who aspires to understand the world tries to order and explain it according to his vision.

The entire text of the novel presents an abundance of vegetal elements. Kawabata describes the beauty and colour of the trees changing from one season to another, from the pine trees of the Imperial Palace, to the rows of weeping willows in Kiyamachi or on the banks of the Takase and Hori rivers.

Not only in the descriptions but also in the conversations between the characters, references to vegetation occupy a central place. During the visit to the nun temple of Saga where his father has retired himself, while preparing him the meal, Chieko answers his question about the cherry trees encountered on the road: "- Their scattered petals float on the lakes. There are only a few cherry blossoms left on the mountain, but when you pass and see them from a distance, they seem even more charming" (Kawabata, 2006, p. 31).

Moreover, even the life of the novel's characters is paced by seasonal rhythms and plant symbolism: "It's already the bamboo autumn, said Takichiro. The clay wall begins to deteriorate and crumble. It's the same with me" (Kawabata, 2006, p. 31).

The omnipresent vegetal elements in the descriptions of The Old Capital also gives the names of four of the book's chapters: "The Flowers of Spring", "Kitayama Cedars", "The Green Pines", "Winter Flowers". The entire text valorises the vegetal elements in the Japanese tradition, as an object of aesthetic admiration and meditation on life.

Kawabata's The Old Capital is structured around the cycle of the four seasons, beginning in spring and ending with the onset of winter. Each season not only marks the passage of time but also frames the emotional and spiritual journeys of the characters. Their experiences are deeply intertwined with seasonal changes, reflecting traditional Japanese aesthetics that emphasize the transient beauty of nature and the impermanence of life.

All the characters in the novel, the members of the Sata family, their friends and acquaintances respect the tradition and go, depending on the season, to admire the cherry blossoms, the budded pines, the cedars, the camphor trees - sacred trees considered to have healing and spiritual powers (Berque & Sauzet, 2004)- the weeping willows or the maples with their autumn reddened leaves.

For instance, a detailed scene describes Chieko visiting the cherry blossoms with her friend Shin'ichi, taking part in the traditional *hanami* ritual. This moment becomes a quiet meditation on impermanence. As the petals fall, Chieko is struck by the poignancy of their brief life. She observes that, "the cherry petals flew through the air, drifting aimlessly, like her own thoughts"; later in the same scene, the narration reflects her quiet sensitivity: "Beneath the blooming trees, she felt that time did not flow, but dissolved" (Kawabata, 2009, p. 42). The *hanami* scene thus becomes a mirror of Chieko's emotional world, reinforcing both the fragility of life and her own feelings of uncertainty and longing.

The same way, an entire chapter of the book, "Kitayama Cedars" highlights the symbolism of cedars as marks of sacredness and protection. Chieko's visit to Kitayama is both a search for her own identity, and at the same time, for protection. The little village near the cedar forest is the place where she begins to discover her own roots, as a possible daughter of a cedar cutter. Walking through ancient forests planted "by unknown hands" (Kawabata, 2009, p. 61), Chieko senses a quiet connection to a past she cannot name. The silence of the trees reflects her own uncertainty about her origins. Unlike the

rooted cedars, she feels unanchored — a symbol of her fragile identity. Her personal sense of rootlessness, of being adopted and unsure of her origins, is brought into sharper focus in this natural setting. This moment, steeped in *mono no aware* and *yūgen*, captures both the beauty and sadness of her estrangement.

In this novel, Kawabata builds an urban setting based on the purest Japanese traditionalist style. The literary image of the millennial capital acquires a symbolic value as the writer's subjectivity defines typical urban landmarks as a network of places of memory, images that convey to the reader that a simultaneous feeling of impermanence and eternity. The last image of the novel, condensed like a *haiku*, that of the snow-covered city at dawn on a frosty morning brings in mind the desire for time to stop at least for a moment and keep the beauty of this land untouched: "The town was as it should be, still silent in sleep" (Kawabata, 2006, p. 182). The final image in The Old Capital, that of Kyoto quietly covered in snow, condenses the emotional resonance of the entire novel into a moment of pure visual and sensory stillness. Much like a *haiku*, this image evokes not action, but presence, not resolution, but a suspension of time. In Japanese aesthetics, snow has long been associated with both purity and impermanence—a symbol that carries the weight of seasonal cycles and spiritual introspection (Shirane, 2012, pp. 27-33)

As Rodica Frenţiu discusses, Yasunari Kawabata's prose exhibits a profound affinity with the haiku form, particularly through his use of ambiguity and the evocation of fleeting moments, pointing out that Kawabata intentionally employs grammatical structures that introduce ambiguity, thus compelling the readers to engage deeply with the text to derive meaning.

Besides this technique, Kawabata's narrative also mirrors the haiku's characteristic of capturing transient beauty and emotions (Frentiu, 2013, pp. 454-65).

For the protagonist of the novel, Chieko, whose journey through the novel has been one of emotional searching and seasonal wandering, the snow does not mark a clear conclusion, but rather a moment of subtle reconciliation with the flow of nature. Her story, full of questions about origin, identity and belonging finds no definitive answer. And yet, in this last scene, there is a sense of quiet acceptance. The snow acts like a veil over the unresolved, suggesting that beauty lies precisely in ambiguity. This aesthetic gesture aligns deeply with *mono no aware*, the pathos of things, and *yūgen*, the subtle and mysterious beauty of what is felt but not fully seen (Juniper, 2004). Kyoto itself, as a historical and symbolic space, becomes in this moment both timeless and transient. The city under snow recalls the classical landscapes of *ukiyo-e* prints and the minimalism of *waka* poetry, where winter imagery evokes contemplative solitude and ephemerality. This concluding image, then, is not just poetic ornament. It is a final aesthetic and philosophical statement. In a world where identity remains uncertain and traditions are quietly eroding, Kawabata offers no resolution—but he does offer presence, stillness and the quiet beauty of a snowfall.

At the end of the book, the winter flowers become a symbol of the calm and subtle dignity that emerges from withstanding the cold. This is not just a seasonal metaphor but a reflection of the inner strength Chieko gains through her experiences. She gazes at camellias blooming in the snow and reflects on how something so fragile can endure the harshness of winter: "Even in winter, the flowers bloom quietly, with no one watching. Perhaps that's why they seem so noble" (Kawabata, 2009, p. 152).

This vision is underlined in the final pages, where the image of falling snow appears as a counterpoint to the novel's opening scene of cherry blossoms. If the petals' fall once expressed the sadness of evanescence and the impossibility of preserving happiness over time, the snow now evokes something quieter, less dramatic: the silent conclusion of one cycle and the subtle anticipation of another. In this shift from the transient to the cyclical, from sorrow to serenity, Kawabata offers not resolution but an aesthetic and emotional stillness. The snow-covered Kyoto is no longer just a backdrop—it becomes a space where the emotional, seasonal, and spiritual dimensions of the novel converge.

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