Kigo and Seasonal Reference: 
Cross-cultural Issues in Anglo-American Haiku

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Introduction

This paper explores conceptions of kigo with the goal of clarifying differences in the approach and meaning of kigo (Japanese “season words”) across two distinct literary cultures. One area of debate in Anglo-American haiku criticism has concerned the importation of kigo as a necessary concept for haiku practice. As haiku in English have no abiding kigo tradition, in some quarters the genre has been described as lacking in artfulness and depth. Attempts have been made to institute kigo practice, largely via the publication of saikiki (season-word glossaries); however, there is little evidence of poets having sought out these works, over the last several decades. So, can it be concluded that the implementation of a kigo practice and culture is unlikely if not impossible, outside of Japan; and if true, what might this imply about the haiku tradition in English?[2]

A second issue concerns the function of kigo terms within Japanese poetry. As viewed from the Anglo-American perspective, the kigo of Japan seem to convey a naturalistic indication of season, but little more. With the above considerations in mind, some of the challenges involved in instituting a kigo culture in English-language haiku will be investigated within a cross-cultural context. As a further note, language issues relating to kigo will be discussed for readers unfamiliar with Japanese.

Parsing kigo and seasonal reference

When we look for seasonal reference in English haiku, a non-season-specific nature image, such as “migratory birds” would likely not meet the definition, as we cannot determine a single season for migration, which occurs in both spring and autumn. This fact points to the prevalence of naturalism as an expectation within English-language haiku. Nature in English-haiku literary culture generally accords with naturalist views, else the image will not be given credence, and the poem will thereby suffer. Another way to put this is that in order for the reader to enter the poem, the images presented need to be experienced or intuited as “true” within a prevailing cultural context. In this light, it might come as a surprise to the English-haiku poet that “migratory birds” (wataridori) is an autumn kigo in the Japanese tradition. Birds arrive from Siberia to winter in Japan, departing in the spring; nonetheless, in the culture of kigo, migrating birds migrate only one way, in one season.[3] This fact offers a first clue that seasonal reference in English and kigo as found in Japan do not rest on the same conceptual basis.

To clarify the discussion, “kigo” will henceforth indicate the Japanese haiku tradition, while “seasonal reference” will indicate the tradition in English. I would like to show how the two terms “kigo” and “seasonal reference” represent different entities, in terms of both intention and culture; that the conceptual base of kigo is its culture, rather than its season, and that it is the culture of kigo which is the context through which kigo has arisen as a literary fundament. The use in English of “season words/seasonal reference” as a translation of “kigo” seems a reasonable first choice, as “season word(s),” is the literal translation. However, some confusion arises when by the idea of “season word/reference,” it is imagined that the context of seasonal reference in English equates to that of Japanese haiku, and by implication, that the literary contexts are virtually identical. What has been missing from discussions of kigo to date is their cultural context, which reaches to the heart of their
expression. It is this aspect which is not easily translated along with the kigo terms themselves.

**Two haiku in English: Treatments of “no season”**

Two representative haiku in English which lack seasonal reference will next be presented, to see how these poems might be treated if an English-language kigo culture were implemented. In this case, existing Japanese kigo culture will be used as a model.

between silent moonlit hills
something waiting
to be named

— Leslie Giddens (in *Blitehe Spirit*)

the river
the river makes
of the moon

— Jim Kacian (in *Mainichi Shimbun*)

In both poems, as a reader, I receive a powerful though secondary sense of season; my impression is subjective, as the season is not given. In Leslie Giddens’ haiku, reading the last phrase, “something waiting to be named” I reflect on origins, on seeds waiting to be born, on the origins of names, envisioning these moonlit hills as hills of deep winter or winter’s end. The first part of the haiku, “between silent moonlit hills” grounds the poem’s primary impression in the natural world (with “silent” implying a witness). Yet “moonlit hills” itself is not specific enough to yield a seasonal reference. In Jim Kacian’s haiku, there are two rivers and a moon in the text—though one river is a metaphorical river of moonlight (a ‘river of the moon’). We do not find these natural, primordial elements of “river,” “moon” or “moonlit hills” to be seasonal references in English, as they encompass our planet in time and space, extending beyond seasonal division. It seems the power inherent in both of these haiku lies in their indication of a non-human-centered imagination—a native wilderness, wilderness. In this sense, they resist humanistic inclinations to connote seasonal division. This would seem an exo- or even contra-humanistic power inherent in haiku.

How might these two poems be treated, if translated into a traditional Japanese-haiku form? Considering Giddens’ haiku, would “moonlit hills” be kigo or not? Searching for “moonlit hills,” in the saijiki, a kigo cannot be found, though “moon” by itself indicates autumn;[6] this seems unnatural—the moon, just as with, say, a river or mountain, is a primordial element in Anglo-American literary culture.

Importantly, in Japan we would not know for certain whether “moonlit hills” has existence as kigo or not, without first checking a saijiki. In the Japanese context, a given haiku may remain unresolved by the reader prior to the lookup process, as the poem may not be fully understood or even taken in prior to consulting a separate text. This mode of reading presents a sharp semantic and cultural contrast with that of haiku in English. In that there is “moon(lit)” in the haiku, and “moon” itself is a kigo, autumn would be the season by default.[7] The kigo “moon” envisions the moon of autumn moon-viewing (tsukimi). So, “moon” is not just any moon: in Japanese haiku, it is a kigo moon: nature becomes reified as an artifact of culture. The bilingual saijiki published by the University of Virginia offers this explanation:
Since ancient times, the natural phenomena favored above all by Japanese poets have been the triplet "snow, moon, blossoms" (that is, cherry blossoms). The moon appears in all four seasons, of course, but in both classical poetry and haikai it has been firmly associated with autumn, so that unless otherwise specified, “the moon” means the autumn moon. One reason for this is that as “blossoms” is the pre-eminent image of spring and “snow” is that of winter, the moon came to connote autumn. No less important a reason, surely, is that the moon seems to shine with a special clarity in the months of autumn.\[8\]

We find a kind of symbolic, poetic culture implicit in natural phenomena, with certain phenomena assigned to certain seasons, partly for reasons of aesthetic balance, or due to historic antecedents, etc. In terms of kigo, the seen moon is related to a kigo culture in which the moon is part of a series of literary conventions and cultural associations (including myth and legend)—irruptions of naturalism. Such does not imply that kigo lack depth, quite the contrary; yet at the same time, kigo is a culture which a naturalist would take exception to. In any case, we find that Giddens’ haiku has no seasonal reference in English, but acquires the autumn kigo “moon” in Japanese.

In Kacian’s haiku, imbibing the fullness of the river and brightness of the moon, I sense a brilliant, warm summer night—the enfolded metaphoric image of the moon unwraps as if were at its fullest, brightest apotheosis. Again, the moon figures prominently, and as with Giddens’ haiku, there is no adjectival modifier for “moon,” so moon becomes the kigo in Japanese, and we have a poem of autumn. Luckily “river” (without a modifier) is not kigo, as in traditional haiku only one kigo is allowed per poem. A modifier might be, rissun no tsuki, “beginning-of-spring moon.” Here, “moon” is adjectivally modified to connote a different seasonal kigo. Since, for kigo, every named phenomena pertains to a specific season, and often a timeframe within a season (early, middle, late), modifiers are often used to locate phenomena (e.g. river, moon, rain) within that season—so, we cannot use “moon” if we mean to indicate a moon of spring, as we can with “moon” for autumn. An autumn moon is a very brief word of 2-on, (tsuki), while the early-spring moon above (rissun no tsuki) is a phrase of 7-on. This is another way in which the given seasonal reference becomes an attribute of kigo culture. In the extremely short 17-on haiku form, an early-spring moon seems verbose compared to the non-adjectival autumn moon. Generally speaking, in kigo culture the moon is never a moon in the empirical sense of simply being—uncontained by the filters of season, collocation, literary and linguistic verities, as determined through historical precedent.

Looking at our two haiku, what might be lost by moving them into an imagined formal kigo system, in English? It seems unlikely that their authors wished or needed to posit a specific season—though season is hinted, at a distance: the precise distance of the reader’s imagination in meeting the poem. As a reader, I sense the power and purity of nature, image, natural life-force in these haiku; a sense of the purity of not-me, of nature and earth beyond seasonal division. It is tempting to say that a seasonal reference would reduce these poems. And yet it is hard to imagine a kigo culture in which the moon would be absent!

Here, the question of kigo versus seasonal reference becomes entirely secondary—in either culture or language. The argument against kigo in Japan was first advanced in 1912 by Ogiwara Seisensui, who saw kigo as an artificial restriction befitting only beginner poets. The term for haiku lacking kigo is “muki haiku.” However, we cannot rightfully apply this term to haiku in English (such as those above) which lack seasonal reference. It would seem that all English haiku are muki from the Japanese point of view, as the context of kigo culture does not exist. Rather, in English we have haiku with or without seasonal reference.

In the case of muki haiku the haiku poet must either explain they are muki, or be known to write muki haiku.
Otherwise, as in the haiku examples above, we will find a specific season, even if the poet wishes the season to be muki. At issue is the treatment in a Japanese context of a haiku which appears to have kigo—which the author does not wish to be “read” as having such—while still considering it as haiku, and not a senryu variant (as senryu do not read with kigo). These issues are not confronted in English, but immediately would if a kigo culture were implemented. Various modern poets have offered solutions to the problematics of kigo. Natsuishi Ban’ya has for instance introduced system of keywords, a transformation of kigo culture into a suggested keyword culture. Along a similar line, last year the delightfully oxymoronic *Modern Haiku ‘No Season’ Season-word Glossary* [gendai haiku saijiki muki] was published (it likewise utilizes a keyword system).[9] From an Anglo-American perspective, problems relating to the use of kigo in Japan and the consequent desire to transmute kigo culture may not be readily apparent.

**A kigo project in English**

Recently, the World Haiku Club (WHC) began a “worldwide kigo project” in English, which will collect “viable kigo.” The prospectus, written by its President, Takiguchi Susumu, states:

The real issue is whether or not finding local season words pertaining to specific climatic and cultural zones or countries in the rest of the world would be possible, plausible, desirable, useful or necessary in terms of making what is written as haiku more like haiku or better haiku. The fact that many poets have thus discarded or dismissed kigo (some have even condemned it as being no more than a weather forecast and not poetry) as inapplicable or irrelevant has damaged haiku outside Japan and denied it cultural and historical depth.

Certainly, this view posits the need for kigo in English, as it implies that some number of poets have up till now been writing faux haiku—that they could be writing something “more like haiku or better haiku,” with approved English kigo. Consequently, the result of not having or rejecting a potential kigo tradition is damage and “cultural and historical” superficiality. What exactly is the damage implied—that of the reputation of haiku in English, as viewed from Japan? The statement seems to reflect an opinion held by traditionalists who consider haiku, in whatever language, as something less than artful if lacking kigo. As for the denial of historical and cultural depth, this seems a thorny problem. It is true that in many mediocre haiku, the formulaic stylism of seasonal-reference-as-weather-forecast is rife. But then, to look fairly at any literature we ought to examine the best it has to offer, not the worst—there are quite a few excellent haiku not only lacking kigo but without seasonal reference—in both English and Japanese. So we enter into the zone of kigo politics: that without kigo—and consequently a definitive, accepted agency-published glossary of kigo to follow—we cannot have cultural or historical depth.

after the bombing
ruins of a bridge
linked by the fog
— Nebojsa Simin (in *Knots*)

In this haiku, which arguably possesses historical and cultural depth, “fog” may or may not connote season; in any case, the felt season here is war. It is any season, the season of hell. In Japanese, “fog” (kiri) is kigo. Its use as kigo in this haiku would subvert the traditional sense of kigo, at the very least. What does “spring” (as the kigo season of fog) have to do with this poem. At most, the kigo would imply an additional level of irony. The predominant aspect of this natural element lies in its insubstantial “as-if” character, in contrast to the violent
machinations of humankind, rather than in any presumed seasonal quality.

Imagining a future *saijiki* in English, how are modern haiku to be treated—how is the contemporary vision of haiku to be expounded? Looking through various Anglo-American season-word projects, what can be witnessed is factory work, specimens, taxonomy. Starting points for focus perhaps, but a work of genius will likely be required before poets will tote that season-word glossary along.

**Delimiting kigo**

It can be argued that *kigo* do not exist outside of the *saijiki* in any real sense. Below, Tsubouchi Nenten broaches the issue delicately when he comments, “The *saijiki* is only one standard of *kigo*; *kigo* are always being born and have died within the nexus of haiku poets.” Quite true, although until the new term is officially documented and published in an approved *saijiki*, has it come into definitive existence as *kigo*? There is a difference between being born and arriving. The “death” of a *kigo* may occur these days as a function of disuse, but it’s hard to shake *kigo* out of electronic dictionaries with so much cheap memory available. It seems fair to say that in Japan *kigo* don’t simply exist, they must also be published—a *kigo* without a *saijiki* is like one hand clapping. This is part of the existential dilemma of *kigo*—their necessity for editorial approval, publication, and hence institutional exclusivity. Their bureaucratization—factors which have in part caused a number of Japanese haiku poets to subvert or revolutionize *kigo* use, as mentioned. The Kyushu poet Hoshinaga Fumio comments, “Haiku is a centralized art. For instance, looking at the *saijiki*, the *kigo* focus only on the Kyoto or Tokyo (Edo) locales. There are no ‘local’ *saijiki*: you cannot find local characteristics. . . . I have repellence, revulsion exactly against the formal rules and approach, *kigo*, and various formal necessities” (Gilbert 29-34).

There is a question of source points for a *kigo* culture in English, if they are to reflect literary history and cultural depth. Looking to Japan for conceptual models, the oldest *kigo* originate in Chinese literature. In a like manner, should multi-cultural perspectives be considered mandatory in English-haiku culture? The first major Japanese *saijiki* collections were published in the Edo period, centuries after the earliest poetic anthologies (*Manyōushū*, *Kokin Wakashū*). Following a similar line, should medieval flower language or Elizabethan poetry be consulted for primary sources? Might historical literary “conversations,” the round of succeeding generations of poets’ and critics’ re-interpretations of earlier works, be a central focus? The dimension of literary reference has not yet been investigated; as an example, Edgar Allen Poe’s 1843 story “The Gold Bug” features a fantastic, poetic insect, a type of scarab beetle (*koganemushi*); would this be a likely candidate? Certainly, by lending literary dimension, such conceptual moves would begin to erode the cyclopean stranglehold of naïve realism within the contemporary season-word tradition. On the other hand, these artificially wrought creations may prove entirely spurious. Even accounting for future conceptual evolution, is the Anglo-American genre putting the cart before the horse, in self-willing a glossary of official terms into being? To the present, season-word collections have not included discussions of conceptual relevance within the wider cultural context of contemporary Anglo-American literature.

**Confabulations: Kigo equals seasonal reference—as opposed to human nature?**

Writing in 1986, Cor van den Heuvel published an influential preface to the second edition of *The Haiku Anthology* (a leading anthology of haiku in English), reprinted in the front of the current third (1999) edition. These sentences have occasioned some confusion:

It seems useful to me to keep the two genres [haiku and senryu] distinct in somewhat the same way the Japanese
haiku relates to Nature and the seasons, senryu relates to human nature. Traditionally, the Japanese have ensured this by insisting that to be a haiku the poem must have a season word (*kigo*), while a senryu does not. (xlv-xlvi)

Indeed, one reason for the popularity of senryu from the Edo period on was that a *saijiki* became unnecessary. Yet, although haiku is considered a “serious” literature, its roots are likewise to be found within the inclusive humor of the haikai genre. (A recent book (in Japanese) by Tsubouchi Nenten, *Haiku Humor*, addresses this topic.) The above quotation was written at a time when a focused awareness of modern Japanese haiku was just beginning to be cultivated in English. Some 20 years later, the categorization of haiku as relating to nature—and senryu with human nature—seems reductive. While there is a locus to each form, interpenetration, synthesis and fusion are evident.

From the traditionalist point of view, there may be an insistence that haiku have *kigo*, but it is not the case that “the Japanese . . . insist that to be a haiku the poem must have a season word.” This has not been true within the last 100 or so years. The contemporary Japanese tradition does not find unanimity regarding *muki* haiku. We have the term “*muki* haiku” itself, which would be an oxymoron according to the above dictum. As well, “*kigo*” is being conflated with “Nature and the seasons”—as opposed to human nature (senryu).” Given that numerous examples of anthropomorphism exist in haiku (e.g. from Bashō, “even the monkey needs a raincoat”), it might be that the duality posed between “nature” and “human nature” is lent credence via a somewhat bald statement regarding genre separation. Significantly, senryu, lacking *kigo*, often contain seasonal reference. One does not need *kigo* to indicate season, as English haiku well reveal. In this aspect English haiku and Japanese senryu seem similar. In any case, the projected duality between “nature” and “human nature” seems at variance with the intentionality of Japanese haiku. [12]

**Kigo: Ecocritical perspectives**

Might having just “seasonal reference” and “non-season” haiku serve well enough in English. In the first American magazine devoted expressly to haiku, John Bull wrote: “If there is to be a real ‘American Haiku’ we must—by trial and error—work out its own standards” (lxi). In a young tradition, these standards yet remain in flux.

Japanese haiku relate to a prevailing literary culture of nature, a culture of psychological space, and a culture of consciousness. Conversely, in the English tradition we have, primarily, realistic objectifications of nature: to paraphrase Joseph Campbell, we live in an age between myths. There seems a problem in English-haiku criticism concerning the prevalent idea that *kigo equals* nature. This seems a misreading of *kigo*. As Hoshinaga Fumio mentions, “*kigo* [may be] more of a symbolic element. . . . [The writer may experience *kigo*] through your heart (inner sense), not through seeing, touching, and so on” (Gilbert 40). Contemporary *kigo* stylism provides an environment which may be symbolic, surreal, impressionistic, disjunctive. Such subversions of naïve realism approach the mythic, so the archaic may be divined within, as much as the modern. Thus, it may be asked, what is the true intention of *kigo*? As a young genre, the English haiku has a unique opportunity to forge a refreshed sense of culture with regard to nature, and there may be more relevant philosophical issues at hand than the question of how to connote season words. A question yet to be addressed in English haiku is, “what do we mean by nature?” Pulitzer-prize winning poet and essayist Gary Snyder has been pursuing this topic over a lifetime. In his ecocritical essay “Unnatural Writing” he comments that
There is an older sort of nature writing that might be seen as largely essays and writing from a human perspective, middle-class, middlebrow Euro-American. It has a rhetoric of beauty, harmony, and sublimity. . . . Natural history writing [is] semi-scientific, objective, in the descriptive mode. Both these sorts are “naively realistic” in that they unquestioningly accept the front-mounted bifocal human eye, the poor human sense of smell, and other characteristics of our species, plus the assumption that the mind can, without much self-examination, directly and objectively “know” whatever it looks at. (163-64)

These comments also serve as a relevant critique of haiku. Snyder asks the reader in his introductory remarks to carefully examine the nature of human awareness, to question habitually unquestioned characteristics of reality. Perhaps it is not kigo which will link us as international practitioners of haiku, but a deeper understanding of the contemporary ethos of our respective literatures. The central issue for haiku in English may not be so much related to kigo and cultural superficiality (the WHC thesis), as with a central question Beat writers such as Snyder first articulated in the 1950s: “How do we grow our own souls?” That is, how do we grow our own culture.

**Tsubouchi Nenten: Kigo and the nature of true intention**

Tsubouchi Nenten refers to several modes of kigo reification in locating the treasure of kigo to haiku: its “true intention.” The following quotation is taken from his *An Introduction to Haiku (Haiku Nyūmon)*.[13]

**Concerning the “Glossary of Seasonal Terms for Haiku Composers (saijiki)”**

There is a measure of covenant in kigo. This covenant can be described as one’s true intention or true sensibility. For example, considering “spring wind” (haru kaze): there is a word, shunpūtaitō (from the Chinese: “wind blowing mild and genial”) which can be applied to human character. It is made of four kanji characters: haru (spring) and kaze (wind) plus the compound (taitō), meaning calm, quiet, peaceful wind. It is a true intention of the spring wind. The true intention is a tradition of the spring wind used by the waka, the Chinese poem, and the haiku, etc. So, the single (kigo) word is a distillation wrought by tradition representing the true intention of kigo. The saijiki elucidates (glosses) the true intentions of such words. In a nutshell, the expression such as “lonely spring breeze” (sabishii haru kaze) does not exist as kigo.

What?

So, when the spring breeze is felt as lonely, “what am I going to do”?

In this case, the spring breeze: it’s calm and warm; however, I feel that it is lonely—nonetheless, there is no way to concretely express this. Here is my haiku,

春風に母死ぬ龍角散が散り
*harukaze ni haha shinu ryuukakusan ga chiri*

to the spring wind
mother dead, herbal medicine
A measure of covenant

Tsoubouchi points out just above that “the single (kigo) word is a distillation wrought by tradition representing the true intention of kigo.” In this sense, each kigo possesses a complex alchemy, every term a multidimensional surface measured within a literary cosmos. Modern haiku writers often subvert or otherwise alter the means or methods of kigo presentation in their compositions; at the same time, most continue to utilize the transformative poetic power inhering in kigo culture, the “environment” spawned by a millennium of kigo. This environment includes nature and culture, objective and subjective, fact and fancy—the topoi of psyche; that is, “reality” as given by the cultural connotations of the terms. As seen above, Tsubouchi is not discussing the true intentions of seasonal reference, but rather the true intentions of a wellspring of literary, philosophic and spiritual culture. What are these true intentions? And, what are the intentions of Anglo-American haiku, regarding kigo?

Would it be best to avoid amassing kigo terms-to-be altogether, and seek first the heart of kigo, its “true intention,” as Tsubouchi above implies. Perhaps only at such a juncture will the tradition in English have acquired the needed measure of insight required to move it further toward new sensibilities, expansions of dimension, regarding the actual words of a proposed kigo world. Whatever words they might be, these upstart kigo, they would be marked but not delimited by haiku — as kigo represent a more extensive culture than that inscribed by any single literary genre. Kigo are not a subset of haiku, but the obverse: haiku utilize the historical culture and tradition of kigo, in which the haiku genre participates.

From the perspective of the Anglo-American genre, as with all unique cultural treasures, kigo may be an achievement witnessed, studied and admired, rather than possessed. It is also quite possible that poets and critics will proceed along an entirely different line. In fact, it seems unclear how to proceed regarding the birthing of a kigo culture in English. Likely, poets themselves will open us to new haiku vistas, yet there also exists a need for further understanding.
ENDNOTES

[1] See “A kigo project in English” in this paper, for a critique along these lines by Takiguchi Susumu.

[2] In this paper “haiku in English” (in shortened form, “English haiku”) is considered to be largely synonymous with Anglo-American haiku. While the English haiku is a worldwide phenomenon, judgment of quality is currently evaluated upon the basis of the Anglo-American haiku tradition.

[3] For the sake of brevity, in this paper “nature” indicates the outdoors; particularly, scenes or images which convey the psycho-aesthetic sense of being autonomous from human intervention.


[5] Traditionally, the arrival of birds in autumn marks the season as a presence, much like specific seasonal varieties of blooming flowers, while the “negative” phenomenon of absenting birds does not occasion significance. This would seem a mark of kigo culture.


[7] For those interested in a Japanese translation of “moonlit hills,” some possibilities might be tsuki oka ni, oka ni tsuki, or okatsuki. In each case, the kigo is “tsuki,” moon.


[10] Nebojsa Simin lives in Novi Sad and is editor-in-chief of the influential Serbian publication Haiku Letter Magazine.

[11] Hoshinaga further comments: “[Notwithstanding,] Kigo are very useful and convenient for creating a sense of place (where) and time (when). We can say that a kigo is just one word — but this one word can speak volumes. . . . kigo [can be] more of a symbolic element. . . . I make kigo with my real experience, my sense of reality. . . .” (Gilbert 34-35).


[13] The text within parenthesis represents my added comment; this method seemed preferable to taxing the reader with footnotes. The original linear text was also separated into paragraphs. I wish to gratefully acknowledge the Kumamoto poet Kanemitsu Takeyoshi for help with the translation.

WORKS CITED


Giddens, Leslie. “between silent moonlit hills something waiting to be named.” *Blithe Spirit* 13.2 (June 2003).


