

INTRODUCTION

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

Rodica FRENTIU^{1*}, Florina ILIS², Oana BIRLEA^{3*}, Ciliana TUDORICA⁴ and Ioana TOSU⁵

^{1,2,3,4} Sembazuru Centre for Japanese Studies, Babes-Bolyai University, Romania. ORCID:

* Correspondence: Oana BIRLEA oana_brl@yahoo.com, ORCID: 0009-0006-5869-5070.

ISSN 2496-1868



Copyright: © 2024 by the authors. Submitted for possible open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

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 Babes-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 și 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 și 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 Toșu (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.