

THE SEASONS OF PLACE: THE POTENTIAL OF *CHIBOO KIGO* IN WESTERN HAIKU

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One of the major issues facing the adaption of haiku into Western languages is the role of *kigo*. Often translated as “seasonal reference” or “seasonal word,” *kigo* are much more than that. Due to their history, which some scholars argue connects back to classical Chinese poetry, *kigo* actually serve as markers of *kisetsu*, or seasonal emotion. Through the use of *kigo*, Japanese haiku are able to easily tap into the large literary tradition of seasonal emotion. However, this tradition is not truly democratic, as William J. Higginson points out in *The Haiku Seasons: Poetry of the Natural World*:

Seasonal feeling [in Japanese literature] comes easily to those living in Japan. ... Until very recently, the weather patterns and climate of Kyoto or Tokyo, both controlled by the warm Japan Current in the Pacific Ocean, have dominated the Japanese perception of the seasons. (Higginson 20)

One of the main tools of Japanese haiku poets is a *saijiki*, an organized collection of *kigo* and related haiku. Each entry in a *saijiki* usually includes a description of the *kigo* itself, possibly even a photograph, a list of related words or phrases, and some examples of haiku that include that *kigo*. These collections help Japanese poets and readers to identify not only the season of the haiku, but also the history of each *kigo* and its seasonal feeling.

Western countries, particularly the United States, do not have this historical literary connection to the seasons, so attempts to use *kigo* in a traditional Japanese sense often fall flat. Haiku poet and editor A. C. Missias argues in the Introduction to the *Acorn* supplement *In Due Season: A Discussion of the Role of Kigo in English-Language Haiku*, “Our selection of season words needs to be broadened to include a more up-to-date and

multi-cultural set of signifiers” (Missias 6). In a country like the United States, which is over twenty-five times the size of Japan, it only makes sense that there would be at least twenty-five regional *saijiki*, rife with regional *kigo*, which are called *chiboo kigo* in Japan. If one accepts that each region should have their own localized *kigo*, those *kigo* should echo the locale that inspired them. Ideally, *chiboo kigo* in Western haiku can and should resonate not only season but also place.

The Trouble with Kigo in English

In his essay “*Seasonality: English-language Haiku in Search of the Vertical*,” Charles Trumbull sets forth the issues faced by English-language haiku poets when attempting to use *kigo*. He begins with a proposal from Haruo Shirane that haiku be analyzed along two axes: “the ‘horizontal,’ representing that aspect of the poet’s consciousness that addresses the present and speaks to his contemporaries; and the ‘vertical,’ the haiku poet’s link to a historical, cultural, and literary past” (Trumbull 10). The argument is posited that *kigo* is the primary tool to develop and strengthen a haiku’s vertical axis. Trumbull then states the obvious problem: “Western haiku poets are still far from erecting a satisfactory vertical axis, seasonal or otherwise, for our work” (13). The issue, of course, is that Western poets do not have the literary history or ancestry upon which to lean. Japanese *kigo* have centuries of cultural, religious and literary history upon which each individual *kigo* can rest, whereas Western countries, the United States of America in particular, simply are not old enough and centralized enough to have such a literary history, or as Trumbull argues, “cultural literacy in America is not widespread or probably deep enough for us to make use of our own vertical axis regularly and do it well” (26).

Trumbull addresses many of the solutions or positions taken by western writers of haiku that attempt to resolve this problem, from the dogmatic “Come hell or high water, we must try to understand Japanese seasonal associations and use them in our haiku” (15) to the dangerously liberal “Season is not really necessary for western haiku; any nature reference will do just fine” (22) to the inclusive “The solution to the *kigo* problem on a global scale or even within large countries is to develop a

global *saijiki*” (17), a solution which echoes the sentiments of William J. Higginson’s important *The Haiku Seasons* and *Haiku World*. Trumbull responds to each assertion in turn, pointing out the obvious flaws with each argument, and ultimately dismissing them in turn as a complete solution. The essay ends on the self-proclaimed somber ideas: “Season clearly enriches haiku in any language, but it does not—cannot—inform non-Japanese haiku as it does Japanese” and “Western haiku and Japanese haiku simply operate within different cultural geometries” (27). The issue with Trumbull’s arguments is that they seem to want an all or nothing solution to the *kigo* discussion, holding up a very conservative, traditional concept of *kigo* to the point that challenges to it from various corners of Japanese literature and haiku poetics are ignored.

Chiboo Kigo

Of particular note is Trumbull’s argument against the proposal “rather than development of a single, global *saijiki*, the solution to the *kigo* problem is a set of good, local *saijiki*” (19). This argument, which seems to take into consideration both the understanding of *kigo* in relationship to place as well as the cultural and climatic diversities of a country like the United States, is dismissed by Trumbull:

Localized *saijiki* may increase the cultural depth of a haiku on a local level, but doesn’t the glory of the *kigo* system, after all, lie precisely in its universality? If one purpose of a *saijiki* is to show how various poets approach a seasonal essence, is it not un-*saijiki*-like to advocate a proliferation of *saijiki* that would serve to ossify divergent approaches and meanings? Taken to a logical extreme, wouldn’t local *saijiki* become more and more esoteric, leading to personal catchwords and Aesopian language? (19-20)

The problem here is that what Trumbull describes as “universality” is not truly universal. As Trumbull himself acknowledges, even the most basic of *kigo* may have a universal understanding in Japan or Japanese culture, but lose that universality when translated to another culture. Trumbull posits “western countries—particularly America—are rarely culturally

homogenous compared to Japan” (26), and seems to ignore that western students and readers of haiku, even when given superb translations, are still at a cultural disadvantage and must read, research and discover the cultural meanings of *kigo* to understand their homogenous universality, often using a *saijiki* as an aide. To this end, a *saijiki* is not simply a reference guide for authors, but also a tool for readers, providing them with a deeper understanding. However, as Michael Dylan Welch points out:

The problem with the codification of *kigo* is that they are codified relative to a certain place. In Japan, *kigo* are traditionally relative to Kyoto, so limits exist, even in Japan—writing cherry blossom poems in June in Hokkaido breaks the ‘rule’ that spring is much earlier further south (Welch 53).

Because *kigo* cannot be said to be universal in understanding, local and regional understanding must be taken into consideration for the *kigo* to have true resonance and for the haiku to succeed along the vertical axis. This is becoming true even in Japanese haiku.

It is this codification and the issues that it presents which has led to a fairly recent innovation in Japan—*chiboo kigo*. Dr. Gabi Greve writes that *saijiki* of *chiboo kigo* collect “regional *kigo*, sometimes even in dialect, from rural areas of Japan. Natural phenomena are included, and more interesting, the local festivals, food and other necessities of the daily life.” These regional *saijiki* seem to solve the issues of codification and over-homogenization of *kigo*, even within Japanese culture.

Dependent and Independent *Chiboo Kigo*

In Western haiku, it can be argued that there already exist two varieties of *chiboo kigo*: dependent and independent; although, up to this point, they have not been identified as such. Both equally represent the season of the haiku; however, dependent *chiboo kigo* require extra information from the haiku to be understood. More often than not, this is because a writer is using a *kigo* that has multiple uses across regions. Jim Kacian writes:

The onset of rain means something completely different to people in India, in England, in the Pacific Northwest. Yet it would be reasonable to expect the poets of these regions to write haiku based on such experiences in English. It seems unlikely that the same *kigo* would suffice for each of them (Kacian 60).

Therefore, the *kigo* “onset of rain” would need another image or reference in the haiku for it to truly be understood as a *kigo* particular to its respective region. This does not necessarily make it a weak *kigo*, as it can still carry the emotional resonance of the season. It simply means that, due to the limitations of language and the condensed nature of the haiku form, a poet must make extra effort to establish a clear region for their *kigo*. Once that region is established, the *kigo* carries the resonance particular to that region, and works as *chiboo kigo*.

For example, the following haiku by Billie Wilson from the online Alaska *saijiki*:

out of the mist
a Tlingit war canoe
filled with tourists

The phrase “tourist” is, indeed, a *kigo*. There is a specific season for tourists in Alaska, and the *saijiki* reads, “during the summer, there are often thousands more tourists in downtown Juneau than Alaskans.” The issue, of course, is that the phrase “tourist” or “tourist season” is not limited to Alaska. There are many regions with tourist seasons, and because this word alone does not connote Alaska, Wilson is required to provide additional information, in this case the name of an indigenous tribe, clearly locating the poem in Alaska; in other words, the *kigo* “tourist” is dependent upon the word “Tlingit” to place the haiku within a region. Once that region has been established, “tourist” becomes a clear *kigo* of that region. The more poets from Alaska that use this *kigo*, the more depth will be added to the word, and the more each haiku will achieve on Shirane’s vertical scale.

However, there are independent *kigo* that are all but exclusive to a

particular region. These *kigo* might be as obvious as regionally specific flora and fauna, or might be as subtle as a linguistic regionalism. They do, however, ground the haiku in both a season and place, and represent the ideal of *chiboo kigo* in western haiku. One such region that is littered with such *kigo* is the San Francisco Bay Area. For example, Patricia J. Machmiller's haiku (Homan, Gallagher, and Machmiller 6):

the papery bits
of velella velella —
how fleeting this life

The independent *chiboo kigo* of this particular haiku is “velella velella.” As Machmiller explains in *The San Francisco Bay Area Nature Guide and Saijiki*,

By-the-wind sailors are small jellyfish of a deep transparent blue that cluster together in large rafts. They are born in the Pacific Ocean over the mid-Pacific Ridge. ... If they come too close to shore, the high on-shore winds of March will beach them. The tide line then covered with thousands of stranded by-the-wind sailors. Their deep blue bleaches in the sun and in a few days they become white, transparent, and paper-like, and are easily blown away on the wind (6).

This is a prime example of *chiboo kigo* indicating both place as well as season. Machmiller uses the scientific name of by-the-wind sailors, *velella velella*, to place the haiku into a specific season in a specific region of the country. This haiku can only happen in the spring on the Pacific coast of the United States. Thus, the *kigo* is independent of any other information in the piece, and the reader, possibly informed by a *saijiki*, knows that the poem is located on that coast. However, there are over 8,000 miles of coastline, not including Hawaii and British Columbia, so while the haiku is located in a particular region, some will argue that it is not specific to the Bay Area.

However, there are *kigo*, such as particular locations and seasonal festivals that are even more localized to the San Francisco Bay Area.

Anne M. Homan writes (5),

[There is] a truly great surfing area north of Half Moon Bay....The place is called Maverick Beach, or Mavericks, in honor of its wild and crazy rides. An average day yields 20- to 30-foot waves; on a really good day, the waves can be more than 50 feet. ... Mavericks is the first competition of the year on the U.S. West Coast, usually in February.

“Mavericks” is a spring *kigo* exclusive to Northern California. This location does not exist anywhere else in the world, nor can the eponymous yearly competition appear anywhere else in the world, and thus Garry Gay’s haiku (5):

Mavericks
another surfboard
without a rider

can only happen in Northern California. “Mavericks” is independent of any other information in the haiku, and as *chiboo kigo* places this haiku in not only a specific season, but a particular place as well. Haiku like those of Machmiller and Gay do not simply prove the necessity of regional *saijiki*, but also explore the potential of *chiboo kigo* to locate a poem both regionally and seasonally.

Conclusion

It would be dangerous to assume that *chiboo kigo* are the only *kigo* that can work in western haiku. Indeed, classical *kigo* that obviously imply seasons—“snow,” “blossoms,” “falling leaves,” etc.—have a place in western haiku as much as *chiboo kigo*. However, as Dhugal Lindsey points out when discussing *kigo* (Missias 47),

It is necessary to be concrete and exact in the choice of these words. As an example, ‘tree’ is an abstract concept devised by the human ego to indicate any number of natural entities. To find a universal Truth in such a ‘tree’ is a task nigh on impossible. Even to search for a universal Truth in an ‘oak’ or a ‘maple’ is a daunting task.

Chiboo kigo have the potential to fill the gap in the vertical axis of western haiku. To ignore the potential of regional *saijiki*, filled with *chiboo kigo* alongside traditional *kigo*, as tools for authors as well as readers of western haiku is to stifle not only the advancement of haiku, but literature in general. Jane Reichhold argues, “Part of the charm of Oriental poetry for Westerners is the way it fills a void in us—the result of our disconnection from nature”. Assuming that this is true, that western readers have a void that results from a disconnect from nature, then the more western haiku poets explore *chiboo kigo* in their work, the more these words and phrases will receive cultural importance, literary resonance, and develop haiku along Shirane’s vertical axis of understanding, and the more readers of haiku, possibly poetry in general, will have that void filled.

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