



**Liza Dalby, *East Wind Melts the Ice: A Memoir through the Seasons*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007. xxvi + 320 pages.**

**Karin Muller, *Japanland: A Year in Search of Wa*. Emmaus, PA: Rodale, 2005. xii + 307 pages.**

**Kate T. Williamson, *A Year in Japan*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2006. 190 pages.**

### **Japan in One Year**

As a rule, the people of Japan are extremely conscious that theirs is a culture that values and appreciates the four distinct seasons. When new acquaintances tell me they have visited Japan, I ritualistically ask them what time of year they were there, since, whether expressed through the cuisine or store-window displays or festivals or other celebrations and diversions, the Japan of winter, for example, is indeed a different place from the Japan

of autumn, or summer, or spring. To experience these differences, one must spend at least a year in Japan, as did the authors of the three recently published works reviewed here. Each Western author had her own motives behind chronicling a year—or the idea of a year—in Japan; and the resultant offerings provide varying nuances of complexity and contribution. These three works involve components and characteristics of diary, memoir, almanac, travelogue, history lesson, social commentary, interpretation, and visual representation of the country, people, customs, and traditions of both historical and contemporary Japan. Collectively, they offer a veritable feast of images, portrayed through narrative, poetry, and visual art itself.

### Seasonal Reflections on Experiencing Japan

Anthropologist Liza Dalby, the first (only?) Westerner to become a geisha,<sup>1</sup> began her studies of Japan as a sixteen-year-old exchange student in Kyushu in 1966. She opens her latest work, *East Wind Melts the Ice: A Memoir through the Seasons*, with an observation about the Japanese obsession with the natural cycle: Japanese pay incredible attention “to the ephemeral yet steadfastly recurring phenomena of the natural world. Japanese culture is so deeply steeped in this awareness that even canned drinks in vending machines change from summer to fall” (p. xv). With the keen eye of a naturalist and fluent language of a poet, Dalby demonstrates throughout her fascinating work how “Japan offers a way to appreciate fleeting seasonalities that we do not articulate nearly so poetically in the West” (p. 155). Her work, though, proves a remarkable exception to this generalization. Through it, she inspires her readers to be more aware of the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and feelings of their natural environments. Or at least her work had such an effect on me.

At the heart of this intricately researched and beautifully produced volume, a nonfiction finalist for the 2008 Kiriya Prize, are seventy-two brief (one- to six-page) essays in the relaxed and unstructured Japanese *zuihitsu* 隨筆 style, one for each five-day period identified in an ancient Chinese almanac that influenced the Japanese notion of calendrical time. These seventy-two seasonal periods were famously codified during the third century B.C.E. in the *Lüshi chunqiu* 呂氏春秋 (*Spring and Autumn Annals of Master Lü*), one of the Five Classics of Chinese literature. On a technical level, then, Dalby's book is an English *saijiki* 歳時記, a personal diary emphasizing the seasons;<sup>2</sup> the calendrical year she chronicles is filled with relevant memories and experiences dating from her childhood in the Midwest through her forty-year interest in Japan. On an effectual level, however, Dalby's work playfully takes her readers through the Japanese seasons with examples from history, literature, and, of course, natural phenomena. Dalby is a gardener, after all, and her work would satisfy even the most pedantic horticulturalist, as she provides Latin names for plants and flowers—and even occa-

sional chemical formulae (e.g., 3, 7-dimethyl-2, 6-octadien-1-ol, a.k.a. geraniol, the fragrance of winter daphne [*Daphne odorata*], p. 26). In emphasizing not only biology but also cultural borrowing from ancient China to Japan, Dalby's book succeeds in demonstrating how "the very idea of the seasons is an intriguing mixture of nature and culture" (p. xx).

Written in an incredibly personal and accessible voice that nevertheless manages to brim with scholarly authority, each of the seventy-two entries begins with a contextualizing paragraph (or two) set off in a sans serif typeface and prefaced with a seal script ornament (ca. eighth century B.C.E.) from the original Chinese calendrical phrase, of which "east wind melts the ice" (東風解凍) is the first. Dalby suggests that the book can be read "horizontally"—reading only these opening paragraphs—to get a sense of the book as an almanac. Naturally, Dalby's year begins not on January 1 but in early February, which marks the beginning of spring, according to the ancient Chinese calendar. From there, her diary progresses through the year, with eighteen entries per season. Part of the joy of Dalby's work is following her logic from prescribed essay title to the contents she has chosen for each entry. The titles themselves are poetic (e.g., "Waving Grasses Wither" at the end of May, "Rainbows Hide" in late November, and "The Copper Pheasant Is Silent" in early December), and Dalby effectively sprinkles her entries with haiku, explaining, en route, what belongs where in Japanese poetry (seasonally), and why. As expected, perhaps, the poems are by the likes of Matsuo Bashō 松尾芭蕉 (1644–94) and Kobayashi Issa 小林一茶 (1763–1828); but modern poets, such as Terada Kyōko 寺田京子 (1923–74), are not ignored. Highlighting the personal nature of the *zuihitsu* form, Dalby has translated most of the poetry herself. And, as a special treat, she even includes a few of her own Japanese poems (see, e.g., pp. 87, 126, 268).

Dalby's memoir-like musings seem uniquely suited to the *zuihitsu* form: She juxtaposes life in her gardens in Berkeley, California, with life in modern Japan, seventeenth-century Japan, and ancient China in a fascinating journey through time and space. A table in the appendix compares the seventy-two periods of the year across these four temporal and geographical realms. The seventeenth-century Japanese equivalencies are courtesy of Shibukawa Shunkai 渋川春海 (1639–1715), official astronomer to the first shogun; those for modern Japan and Northern California are Dalby's derivations. Although Dalby points out that "none of the seventy-two phenomena picked out to compose this almanac focuses on human activity" (p. 167), some of her more playful modern equivalencies do just that. For example, in late June, when "cicadas sing" in ancient China, "irises bloom" in seventeenth-century Japan, and "trumpet lilies bloom" in Northern California, "air-conditioning [is turned] on" in modern Japan (p. 289).

Essay 42 ("Rice Ripens") provides a wonderful example of Dalby's free-flowing *zuihitsu* style. She begins by considering various terms for rice in

Japanese (*ine* 稲, *kome* 米, *gohan* 御飯, *meshi* 飯), describes *inari* 稲荷 sushi, explores expectations of Japanese mothers (especially with respect to their children's *bentō* 弁当 lunch boxes, which she dubs "tiny masterpieces," p. 167), suggests that the notions of season and weather are frequently confused by Americans, comments on the shared Japanese and Western custom of wearing white only until the end of summer, elaborates on elaborate Heian-era (794–1185) robe color combinations, and mentions an early September drive up the Sonoma coast that immediately called to mind the classic "Seven Autumn Plants." All in one chapter! Furthermore, humor, puns, and wordplay are aplenty. For but one example, from essay 45: "Haiku clubs regularly gather on this evening [of the first full moon of September] to moon over the moon and wax eloquent in seventeen syllables" (p. 179).

Reference works aside, I know few books where such fascinating tidbits—cultural, scientific, and otherwise—appear on every page. Some could be considered trivia, such as the fact that "bamboo flowers and sets seed only once every sixty years" (p. 50); but others, such as the origin of the 108 "snares and delusions" (*bonnō* 煩惱) of the world (pp. 262–63) are unexpected revelations. (I had studied Japanese religion for years and had never understood the mathematics behind why there are precisely 108 *bonnō*. And there an answer was!) Dalby reveals herself to her readers as the type of fascinating person who, for example, would pull off the side of the road to take a closer look at turkey vultures in a tree (p. 280) or who would attempt (unsuccessfully, alas) to make her own tea with leaves plucked from a camellia bush she had introduced to her California garden (pp. 221–22). How I wish I had been at the University of Illinois when she visited in September 2003 (pp. 186–89)!

Dalby offers musings on many abstract yet quintessentially Japanese concepts: *suki-kirai* 好き嫌い (*lit.*, "like/dislike"), *urusato* 故郷 (native place, hometown), and *wabi-sabi* 侘寂 (an aesthetic having to do with "the beauty of extreme understatement," p. 184, in a particularly brilliant essay on *ikebana* [no. 46]). She also offers description of Heian-period games, rites, rituals, and traditions (e.g., pp. 90–92, 169–70, 195–97) and instructions on how to write *waka* 和歌 poetry (p. 94). She explains how to dry persimmons (pp. 235–36) and even presents recipes for cooking with American kelp (pp. 225–26). Indeed, food rightly plays a prominent role in her entries, since "one of the most popular ways Japanese pay attention to the seasons is by eating" (p. 140). And the fascinating essay on Dalby's involvement with the film version of Arthur Golden's *Memoirs of a Geisha* (no. 44, pp. 174–77) would provide an illuminating read for undergraduates in a course on Japanese or Asian culture, I am sure; she uses an astutely original (and memorable) metaphor of a "sushi sandwich" to describe the hybridized American–Japanese film.

Clothbound in a striking *moegi* 萌黄 (“sprout green”; see p. 24) cover, enjoyment of the book is strengthened by its effective design. (The University of California Press and the author should both be proud.) Line drawings of such natural things as carp, octopi, kudzu, Heike crabs, and even a mythical half plant, half animal called a “borometz” (see it to believe it on p. 195) add to the playfulness of the volume. Her Web site, [www.lizadalby.com](http://www.lizadalby.com), mentioned in the afterword, provides additional resources, including a visual journal of the seventy-two seasons and a key to the seal script ornaments in the text.

In short, Dalby’s book is a treasure trove of the most fascinating natural and cultural information. Horticulturalists, botanists, ornithologists, mycologists, meteorologists, entomologists, etymologists, gastronomists, artists, and aesthetes of all types will undoubtedly find something of interest within this volume. Moreover, those interested in Asia and Japan—and especially the cultural connotations of the seasons in Japanese art, literature, and poetry—will find the work particularly rewarding. Here is a book I plan to revisit many times throughout the year(s) to come.

### **A Year of Experiences in Japan**

If Dalby’s work describes *experiencing* Japan, Karin Muller’s 2005 book, *Japanland: A Year in Search of Wa*, describes *experiences* in Japan. An equally personal book, Muller’s is neither as avant-garde nor as delightfully eccentric as Dalby’s. Muller, in fact, has much precedent: Mass-market stories of a year spent in contemporary Japan by Westerners had become quite popular by the early 1990s, when offerings by Bruce Feiler (1991) and Pico Iyer (1991) appeared.<sup>3</sup> Subsequently, with the recent popularity of *Lost in Translation* and *Memoirs of a Geisha*, a certain general level of Japanese cultural literacy has been assumed in the West: the educated Western reader knows at least something about sumo and judo and karate, sushi, samurai, geisha, hierarchy and formality, ideas of obligation and “saving face,” salarymen, karaoke, pachinko, and tensions between tradition and modernization. Within this context of familiarity Muller offers her work.

Muller, a thirty-four-year-old Swiss–American “adventurer” who had previously produced documentaries on Vietnam and South America, initially learned about Japan through judo. (She holds a black belt.) Her admittedly naïve mission was to “become Japanese”—a process that would take “at least a year, maybe more” (p. x). Moreover, her plan was to make a documentary along the way, attempting to gain “more than a superficial glimpse” of Japan’s culture and traditions (p. xi).<sup>4</sup> Muller was searching not only for the *wa* 和 (peace/harmony) she experienced while practicing judo but also for something akin to the meaning of life. In one year she wished, in fact, to pry “open the doors to traditional Japan”—a task she

described, midway through her stay, to be “like trying to break into Fort Knox” (p. 179).

Although Dalby could be (and undoubtedly has been) referred to as someone who is “more Japanese than Japanese themselves,”<sup>5</sup> Muller came to a Japan that, at the beginning of her stay, was “utterly alien” to her (p. ix). Echoing a complaint of numerous Western adults who live in Japan, she writes, “it’s like I’m six years old again, living by someone else’s complicated and incomprehensible set of rules” (p. 91). Perhaps because she was filming a documentary, though also due to repeated assistance from an information officer at the Tourist Information Center in Kyoto, Muller was able to witness and participate in a staggering array of activities that represent both traditional and contemporary Japan: rice harvesting (by hand), sword making, *yabusame* 流鏑馬 (horseback archery) training, sumo training, gateball playing, *yamabushi* 山伏 (mountain ascetic) training, and *taiko* 太鼓 (drum) performing. She watched a kabuki performance, underwent a *kangyō* 寒行 (midwinter purification) ritual, observed the crowds in Tokyo’s Harajuku, stayed in a capsule hotel, shadowed a geisha, and began the famous Shikoku pilgrimage on foot. If these lists themselves seem exhausting to read, learning that the author herself unfortunately came down with pneumonia during her pilgrimage, which is recounted near the end of her book, might not come as a surprise. Thereafter Muller gained an insider’s look at the Japanese medical system.

Surprisingly, readers do not find out what time of year Muller arrived in Japan until chapter 5 (p. 51), where they learn that she had been there for just two months at cherry blossom time (in March). But earlier, in chapter 4, Muller participated in the famous Sanja Matsuri 三社祭 in Tokyo, which readers familiar with Japan may know takes place the third weekend in May. Thus the astute reader wonders to what extent temporal reality was compromised for the structure of the narrative. Ambiguity over the original language of several conversations reported in the book also heightens confusion.<sup>6</sup> Coupled with the author’s frequent use of poetic hyperbole, this ambiguity almost serves to bring the work into the genre of creative non-fiction. Are all readers able to sort out reality from exaggeration?

Reviewers knowledgeable about Japan should have been asked by the publishers to read the manuscript before it was printed, as they would have spotted errors in romanization, usage, and consistency. For example, “Fugisawa,” throughout the book, should be “Fujisawa”; “Sinchan” should be “Shinchan”; “Koichi-san” twice appears as “Kouchi-san”; and Kōbō Dai-shi 弘法大師 (774–835), founder of the esoteric Shingon school of Buddhism—and in whose honor the Shikoku pilgrimage is dedicated, is very unnaturally referred to in the text as just “Kobo.” Facts and details aside, Muller’s giftedness as a storyteller comes out in numerous episodes, including her humorous encounter with politeness on a train (pp. 134–37) and her

hilarious account of trying to get rid of a cumbersome wood-and-oiled-paper umbrella (pp. 219–21).

Does Muller succeed at “unravel[ing] the great ball of Japanese culture” (pp. 190–91)? Her rather anticlimactic conclusion is that conformity “is not a sign of weakness, but rather a great inner strength” (p. 300). In terms of providing accurate, reliable information on Japanese society and culture, Muller’s book ultimately suffers from superficiality in its attempts to cover so much territory. The book might nicely complement her four-hour documentary (which I have not seen); but knowledge-seekers who want to move beyond stereotypes or another entertaining read will have to look elsewhere.

### A Visual Year in Japan

Kate T. Williamson, author/artist and designer of *A Year in Japan*, will be someone to watch. Just a few years after her graduation from Harvard (where she studied filmmaking), and after spending a year studying art and aesthetics in Japan, she has already authored (or coauthored) and designed four books.<sup>7</sup> Embracing Valerie Kirschenbaum’s idea of “designer books,” where authors serve as designers, Williamson’s offering demonstrates how “visual texts can present truths that purely nonvisual texts cannot.”<sup>8</sup> Asianists are lucky that Williamson selected Japan as a subject for her discerning attention.

Indeed, *A Year in Japan* is so much a visual text that many would undoubtedly classify it as an “art book.” Where the book ends and the art begins is intentionally unclear. The author’s own vivid watercolors and line drawings are the focal point of this visual journal, with accompanying *handwritten* text that itself is, perhaps not surprisingly, artistic.<sup>9</sup> The topics of the no fewer than thirty-five *zuihitsu*-like commentaries, arranged more or less chronologically (from autumn to summer) on un-numbered pages, interpret and add shades of meaning to the accompanying art. The brief comments, ranging from two sentences to four paragraphs, assume, to a similar extent as Muller’s book, a general level of familiarity with Japanese culture. Upon this foundation, though, Williamson’s images and texts add a level of nuance aided by the author’s keen sense of observation and detail. Shining through every narrative, as well, is the everyday nature of things. For example, in “Lunch with a Geisha,” Williamson recounts having an informal lunch with the geisha Haruno-san in Kyoto. Near the end of this piece, the mundane seems rather unexpected: “After she finished her [egg] sandwich, Haruno-san lit a cigarette and took a picture of me with her cell phone.” Geisha are normal people, too, Williamson seems to be saying, with a wink. This essay is preceded by a colorful, annotated differentiation between a geisha and a *maiko* 舞妓 (an apprentice geisha). What Williamson accomplishes on two pages with two pictures and just fourteen words is quite impressive.

Williamson's ordering and composition of the text are to be commended, as well. Early in the book (in autumn), she follows a translation of a Heian-period poem on the moon with an entry on moon-viewing (where she notes the common Japanese "combination of nature appreciation and social events"); a description and image of *tsukimi dango* 月見団子 (pounded rice covered in sweet bean paste—sweets evocative, not only by name, of moon-viewing); and a series of visuals representing the "rabbit in the moon," the Japanese equivalent of the "man in the moon." The association of food with representative action or event is made throughout the book: a delicious-looking *bentō* appears before a description of the Shinkansen (on which station-purchased boxed lunches, called *ekiben* 駅弁, are commonly eaten); an elaborate *kurisumasu kēki* (Christmas cake) receives a two-page spread before the discussion of Christmas and New Year's in Japan; and festival fare is pictured and described before a discussion of fireworks, light-ups, and the Awa Odori, an August dance festival in Tokushima.<sup>10</sup>

Seasonal images from nature also take the reader/viewer through the Japanese calendar: ripe persimmons on a tree, autumn-tinged maple leaves, plum blossoms, peach blossoms, cherry blossoms, hydrangeas, lotuses. Famous sites are not ignored (though Mt. Fuji, perhaps too cliché for the author, is conspicuously absent): the sand dunes at Tottori, waterfall at Nachi, and the "wedded rocks" (*Meoto Iwa* 夫婦岩) at Futami all make artistic appearances. Williamson explores ground covered neither by Dalby nor Muller by visiting Okinawa. From her stay on Taketomi Island, the reader/viewer is rewarded with paintings of, for example, a tiny *shima* 島 banana, an Okinawan bitter melon and bitter melon stir-fry, and a three-stringed *sanshin* 三線 (Okinawan shamisen). Dalby would approve of Williamson's explanation of a traditional dyeing method called *shiborizome* 絞り染め, where she shows ten shades of natural indigo and provides their poetic names; Muller would appreciate the description of sumo wrestlers carrying out everyday tasks (riding the subway and making withdrawals from ATMs). Anyone should be able to appreciate the fresh, artistic approach through which Williamson portrays her year in Japan.

Simply put, Williamson's *A Year in Japan* is a book that deserves to be seen—and shared. For a preview, check out the author's Web site, [www.katetwilliamson.com](http://www.katetwilliamson.com). Undergraduates, especially those with a taste for contemporary art, may well want to become students of Japanese culture after seeing this book.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>See *Geisha* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983), the fascinating ethnography and personal account of her training and life as the geisha Ichigiku.

<sup>2</sup>Formally, a *saijiki* is a glossary of seasonal terms and illustrative examples for haiku composers, but the term also describes the type of seasonal diary-like literary genre exemplified, in English, by Dalby's book. Several of the entries were originally composed by the author in Japanese, in fact. In a fascinating afterword, Dalby offers thoughts on writing in Japanese, a process that allowed her "to use Japanese cultural concepts as springboards" for her own points of view (p. 295). She even answers a question that is frequently asked of me: What is it like to compose in Japanese on a computer? (See p. 297 for her description of the process.)

<sup>3</sup>Bruce S. Feiler, *Learning to Bow: An American Teacher in a Japanese School* (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1991); Pico Iyer, *The Lady and the Monk: Four Seasons in Kyoto* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991).

<sup>4</sup>Feiler embarked on a similar mission: an attempt to search for Japan's "inviolable core" (*Learning to Bow*, p. 11); and Alan Booth, in *Looking for the Lost: Journeys Through a Vanishing Japan* (New York: Kodansha International, 1995), described a quest for what many Japanese themselves consider to be "truly Japanese" (p. 5).

<sup>5</sup>The phrase is frequently expressed as *Nihonjin yori Nihon-tsū na hito* 日本人より日本通な人.

<sup>6</sup>The confusion is exacerbated by the fact that the reader is unsure of the author's proficiency in Japanese. Early in the book, for example, we learn that the author "can't read Japanese" (p. 13). Late in the book, Muller offers this atypically descriptive contextualization of a conversation with a sacked salaryman: "He used English when he first spoke to me, but since then he's switched to Japanese. Sometimes I understand his words, sometimes not, but always from his expression, I know what he's saying" (p. 233). In his short story "The Fisherman Who Had Nobody to Go Out in His Boat with Him," William Maxwell described such an event as a "strangeness": two individuals "did not speak the same language but, each speaking his own, nevertheless understood each other perfectly." See *All the Days and Nights: The Collected Stories of William Maxwell* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 331–34: 332.

<sup>7</sup>Her first two books, coauthored with Jennifer Butefish and Maria Fernanda Soares, look at the worldwide Hello Kitty phenomenon.

<sup>8</sup>Valerie Kirschenbaum, *Goodbye Gutenberg: Hello to a New Generation of Readers and Writers* (New York: Global Renaissance Society, 2005), 209. Writes Kirschenbaum: "With designer books, we will experience a new flowering of the verbal and the visual arts" (p. 85).

<sup>9</sup>Believing that one's handwriting is telling of one's character, employers in Japan have traditionally required job applicants to handwrite their applications.

<sup>10</sup>Victoria Abbott Riccardi, another Westerner to write of her experiences in Japan, is also careful to emphasize the importance of the seasons—and the seasonality of cuisine—in Japan. In her case, instead of offering art, she flavors her narrative with seasonal recipes. See her *Untangling My Chopsticks: A Culinary Sojourn in Kyoto* (New York: Broadway, 2003).