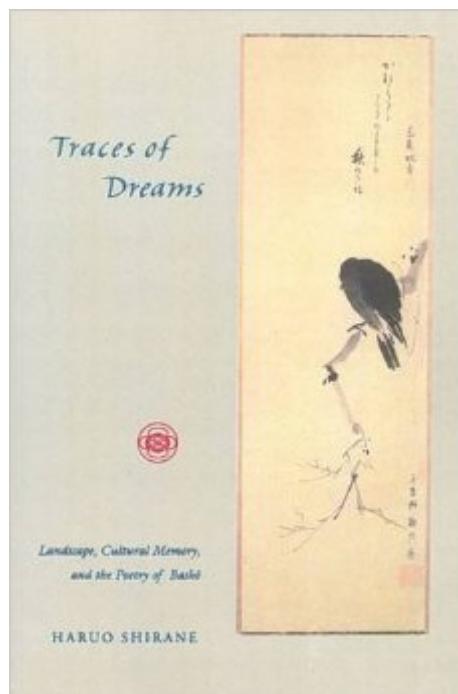


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Traces Of Dreams: Landscape, Cultural Memory, And The Poetry Of Basho



Synopsis

Basho (1644-94) is perhaps the best known Japanese poet in both Japan and the West, and yet there has been remarkably little serious scholarship in English on his achievement. This book is intended to address that virtual void by establishing the ground for critical discussion and reading of a central figure in Japanese culture, placing the works of Basho and his disciples in the context of broader social change. Intended for both the general reader and the specialist, *Traces of Dreams* examines the issues of language, landscape, cultural memory, and social practice in early modern Japan through a fundamental reassessment of haikai—popular linked verse that eventually gave birth to modern haiku—particularly that of Basho and his disciples. The author analyzes haikai not only as a specific poetic genre but as a mode of discourse that emerged from the profound engagement between the new commoner culture that came to the fore in the seventeenth century cities and the earlier traditions, which haikai parodied, transformed, and translated into the vernacular. *Traces of Dreams* explores the manner in which haikai both appropriated and recast the established cultural and poetic associations embodied in nature, historical objects, and famous places—the landscape that preserved the cultural memory and that became the source of authority as well as the contested ground for haikai re-visioning and re-mapping.

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Customer Reviews

Matsuo Basho (1644-1694) is certainly the best-known haiku poet of all time, even though he never heard the word "haiku". What he did do, in his own time, was (a) write and teach the writing of

"haikai no renga", the popular style of linked, collaborative poetry of his time, (b) collect the largest number of followers (or "disciples") of any poet of his day, (c) write a number of short prose pieces with short verses he called hokku (haibun), (d) write a number of independent hokku (which we now call "haiku"), and (e) write several travel diaries, the last of which, "Narrow Road of the Interior" goes by a number of titles in English and is one of the great masterpieces of world literature. You can find out about all this from other books. However, in Professor Shirane's book, you will find out more: Basho was not the only person doing these things during his lifetime. And although nobody is likely to say that Basho was not the most important poet of his day, he was definitely influenced in all his work by the trends of the time. When funny verses were the vogue, early in his career, he wrote funny verses. When Chinese poetry became a major influence on the poetry scene, his writings reflected his own rich knowledge of that Chinese heritage. When other poets started advocating a "lighter" style, more directly concerned with the things of daily life, Basho took up "lightness" as an important element of his art. Basho's uniqueness does not lie in his unique type of poetry, but in his great ability to ride the wave of fashion in a common type of poetry and make something rich and lasting from it.

William Higginson's review of this important book is spot-on. However, he missed a few features of the book I regard as significant. One rather major omission is Shirane's wonderful, in-depth translation/analysis of a Basho-group kasen, "Withering Gusts", which is really the centerpiece of the book since it brings together all the critical themes of the book. In fact, the subtext of the book seems to lionize Basho as a renku (linked-verse) master par excellence, emphasizing his catalytic role in the development of renku (or haikai no renga as Basho would have called it). "Withering Gusts" is an early example of a kasen (36-link renga or "renku") by Basho et al. It is outstanding in that the participants were all young, full of vigor, and overbrimming with newness and skill. Of course, Basho was the "master" of this renku session, but his presence seems to have stimulated the other renkujin to great poetic heights. One plus is the reproduction of a few of Basho's own haiga, sumi-e drawings he made with his hokku poems and calligraphy included. Haruo Shirane is a thoughtful critic who brings much to bear on his subject. He skillfully shows how Basho brought newness and vitality into renga by introducing haikai subjects that would have been prohibited in the more formal and sober rule-bound renga of earlier masters such as Sogi (d. 1502). Shirane shows how Basho not simply introduced demotic subjects but raised them to the level of great poetry. This book, as the flap claims, is truly for both the general reader and the specialist. As a "general reader" myself, I must confess some of the analysis went over my head, but there is enough that I can

understand that kept my interest throughout.

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