

Aaron Kane, “‘Transforming Tradition’: Seasonal Associations in Anime and Japanese Pop Culture”

Anime is an emerging form of contemporary Japanese animation, and is highly popular worldwide. Though a recent art form, it traces distinct roots to the traditional and premodern Japanese aesthetic, finding inspiration in poetry, literature, and other forms of expression. In the Japanese artistic and cultural tradition, seasonal themes and associations have been an integral part of this aesthetic for over a thousand years. Given the importance of seasonal associations, and the deep roots of anime in Japanese tradition, this paper explores how traditional seasonal associations inform anime as a contemporary art form, especially with regard to release season. To examine this, I screened and analyzed anime of a variety of genres and release dates, and compiled a database of the main themes and motifs of each genre, organizing by theme and release date. Comparing this database to already-understood traditional Japanese seasonal associations, a striking correlation can be seen- anime does appear to be influenced by traditional seasonal themes and associations. But what can also be seen is the influence of modern associations, such as with Japanese school life- as the target audience of mainstream anime is school-age youth. I believe these results indicate an evolving model of seasonal associations in Japanese pop culture, as seen through anime. A set of core themes and associations inform anime, but these associations are themselves subtly shaped by contemporary influences such as the cultural significance of school life. This not only forms the modern use of seasonal associations in anime, but suggests that anime may one day transform tradition, and inform future pop culture many years from now. In addition, I examined this change in relation to the localization and import of anime to other markets, such as the United States.