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## Observations from Kyoto

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*"Gen Z wants authenticity at all costs, but we project our own fantasies on the places we visit."*

Elena Clavarino, *Air Mail*

Welcome to *Observations from Kyoto*. Many of you have already been receiving this newsletter under the heading of *The Writers in Kyoto Digest*. With this issue, we are spinning it off as a separate newsletter of more general interest to a wider audience.

Each month, *Observations* will contain a variety of short pieces, primarily related to Japanese history, literature, and contemporary issues, with a focus on Kyoto and the Kansai area. We also plan to include reflections about the task of being a writer and the challenges of getting your work published.

We welcome your feedback, especially any requests you might have for a discussion of specific topics. Send your feedback via email to [kyoto\\_observed@shimenawa.org](mailto:kyoto_observed@shimenawa.org).

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### ***Has Japan become a consumable product?***

We should have known something was afoot when Oprah came to Kyoto last year to report on the cherry blossoms, only to discover that the *sakura* had not bothered to include her in the distribution list for their 2024 itinerary. Nevertheless, she did her best to advertise our city as a new spot for the cool kids to come and visit.

This year, the season started off with a bang, as the prestigious *New York Times* published a special heavyweight side-bound magazine titled *J is for Japan*, offering us a primer in the A,B,C's of all things Japanese.

Thumbing through, I discovered that M is for Matcha. Brought to Japan by the Eisai, founder of the Rinzaï school of Zen. However, the primer somehow managed to miss the meaning of matcha, especially for Eisai – the reason he brought tea to Japan in the first place. I don't want to spoil it for you, so I'll just give you a hint – something to do with long nights spent in Zen meditation.

The venerable paper of record also somehow missed the fact that the reason matcha has become big in the Big Apple, and likely came to their attention, is due to the efforts of a small number of individuals, possibly one in particular. At least that's according to the Brooklyn insiders I talk to. So there you have it – consumption without requiring comprehension seems to be the order of the day.

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### ***A message via Air Mail***

Graydon Carter's newsletter *Air Mail* is another case in point. Carter took over the editorship of *Vanity Fair* from Tina Brown in 1992, and served as editor for some 25 years, until 2017. Although nominally retired, he publishes *Air Mail* for a target demographic the *New York Times* labels "worldly cosmopolitans" – that's ad-speak for "cool kids".

Curious as to one might do for an encore after *Vanity Fair*, I took a look and was surprised to find that the headline article was "Japan's Moment in the Sun" by senior editor Elena Clavarino. "Aha!" I thought. "Everybody is getting on the bandwagon."

The article starts by quoting some amazing, if not downright upsetting facts. Japan has supplanted Paris as the most searched-for destination on social media (ignoring for the moment that we are comparing a city with a country).

Three million tourists are reported to have arrived in one month (April 2024) alone. Gen Z and millennial visitors (born roughly 1997-2012 and 1981-1996, respectively) have increased some 1,300 percent. As a result, the luxury hotel market is projected to grow around 8% (one would assume annually) over the next few years.

Clavarino also talks about new trends in Japan of which I was unaware, such as self-heating meals that will warm up on their own if you just pull on a string. Also "listening bars" where talking is discouraged in favor of listening to DJ's spinning vinyl. The listening bars are already

showing up in New York.

The article has strong Gen Z focus, discussing how Japan matches up well with their interests – a strong food culture, labeled packaged subcultures like the Bosozoku (bikers) and Lolitas (don't ask), the search for anything unusual and offbeat enough to make for a truly unique social media post, which Gen Z has elevated to the status almost of a hard currency.

Some of this makes sense – the oldest members of Gen Z are now 28, in the prime of their traveling years. But the youngest are only 13, so it could possibly go on for a while. On the other hand, Clavarino's admonitory epithet of "moment in the sun" could prove to be prophetic. With breathtaking insouciance, she avers that "understanding such a faraway, rich culture with a more than 1,000-year-old history may require a few more visits."

If the "authenticity" of Japan proves a nut too tough to crack with their fantasy projections, the cool kids might choose to move on to targets that prove more amenable, and thus more consumable.

An interesting perspective, to be sure. But at the same time, the article has the feel of being written from New York City rather than resulting from having set foot in Japan. It was difficult to ferret out any tidbit of information that could not have been extracted in a few hours of internet search. The heavy focus on trendy Tokyo (9 mentions compared to just 2 for Kyoto) also tells you something. Perhaps, just perhaps, we will be spared the worst.

<https://airmail.news/issues/2025-4-5/japans-moment-in-the-sun>

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### ***Gresham's Law comes to Kyoto***

Of course, it's not hard to make the case that all the cool kids have arrived already, and what is left is to deal with the consequences. Baseball fans love to quote Yogi Berra – "It's so crowded nobody goes there any more." Economists favor a more erudite approach, which they have christened "Gresham's Law", to wit – bad money drives out good. The basic theme is the same, even if the nuances differ – beyond some threshold, quantity (with its constant companions, dilution and depreciation) becomes the mortal enemy of quality.

An article in the English language version of the Asahi Shimbun details what we've all known instinctively. From 2023 to 2024 or 2025, Kyoto saw a 30% increase in foreign tourists, while

at the same time experiencing a 15% decrease in Japanese tourists. Average spending by foreign tourists essentially doubled, from 37,400 yen in 2019 to 71,700 yen in 2023, while average spending by Japanese tourists increased just 17% from 20,300 yen to 23,800 yen.

It's not hard to guess who the downtown core businesses are catering to, as foreigners account for 70% of major hotel occupancy, while Japanese tourists shun the attractions of central Kyoto for more peaceful outlying districts. Personally, I'm hoping for a bit of a silver lining – that some entrepreneur will find a way to resurrect The Gael, a wonderful Irish pub whose like, I fear, will not be seen again.

[https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/15690003?fbclid=IwY2xjawJcOZpleHRuA2FlbQlxMQABHW6YWMIviRu1R1MzEkt1kjhgQBp96ELVGNLKNqs6pa7XR4N2g28WR25bBg\\_aem\\_o0lASSQ5cd4qsjsDD8QRg](https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/15690003?fbclid=IwY2xjawJcOZpleHRuA2FlbQlxMQABHW6YWMIviRu1R1MzEkt1kjhgQBp96ELVGNLKNqs6pa7XR4N2g28WR25bBg_aem_o0lASSQ5cd4qsjsDD8QRg)

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### ***Has Asian fiction become a consumable product too?***

The Australian arts and culture scene sports a well-written journal with the improbable title of *Kill Your Darlings*, taken from William Faulkner's sage advice that "In writing, you must kill all your darlings" – which I take to be the overly clever words and phrases we all become so fond of, but which threaten to dilute the impact of our work as a whole.

In a recent issue, Nina Culley presents an article about the trend in translated Asian fiction being published in the West, which she dubs "cosy Asian fiction". I'll confess to not having read any of this type of work myself, unless you count Murakami's *Norwegian Wood*, which seems to barely qualify.

But even without knowing too much about the books themselves, the article makes many telling points about literary trends in general, the nature of publishing, the needs and desires of foreign readers. Perhaps most importantly, she seems to have spotted an emerging trend in Asian fiction that could have wider implications.

Let's start with the last of these – the trend in "cosy Asian fiction". She takes a number of approaches to defining this new category, all of which seem to add up. In terms of subject matter, there is a focus on the quotidian details of life – "cats, cafes, and bowls of steaming ramen." In terms of theme, she sees a rejection of "the conventions of dramatic arcs", and an avoidance of "heavy-handed moralizing" in favor of "restrained, elliptical storytelling".

I think she's onto something here, and it's not limited to Asia. People are "fatigued by binaries" all across the globe. You can see this in the attitudes of the young (including some of my own children) who have abandoned the bigger issues and the hero's journey for the smaller victories of life – the iron pumped, the roll not taken, the parting glass left half-full.

These tales do not signal a return to the self-satisfied and myopic world of the '50's. That world is not coming back – our own consciousness won't permit it. The world they inhabit, according to Culley, is "magical realism." Everyday life on the surface, but with something added, something new – the adventures becoming adventures of the contemplative, of the psyche, of the soul. A cup of coffee that allows you to recover your past, for example.

Why is this needed? Exactly because people have become exhausted by binaries. You can't really blame the idea of binaries themselves for our current mess. The problem seems to be with the relationship between the binaries. It's no longer a playful dance, more like an armed conflict. People are desperate for ways to find resolution.

The answer has historically been spiritual – meditation, contemplation, the search for a *satori* where the binaries find resolution in their own irrelevance. But the spiritual traditions themselves have become suspect, due in no small part due to the "heavy-handed moralizing" that Culley takes note of.

Magical realism in effect chronicles the search for new forms of resolution – immediately accessible without the burden of a crushing metaphysics. That cup of coffee which offers resolution with the past. That unremarkable job in a convenience store where daily routine becomes a safe harbor from the *Sturm und Drang*. Spiritual guides who come to you, rather than making you hunt for them.

Culley deserves much credit for noting that these factors are conspiring to bring forth a new form of literature. Also to her credit, she points out its vulnerability to exploitation, due to factors we've already discussed in the articles above. It risks becoming a fad, attracting imitators and the inevitable dilution of quality. It risks becoming attractive to foreign readers who start out seeking "authenticity", but inevitably project their own narratives into stories that do not belong to them. Not to mention exploitation by the modern-day publishing industry.

These phenomena occur almost ineluctably with any new art form. It happened with science fiction. It happened with westerns. Try finding a decent romantic comedy on Netflix. You can argue that it even happened back in the Heian Period when the *Tale of Genji* opened up

new avenues that were quickly trodden by others.

But just as a fashion can become a fad, it can also become a genre. The issues are real but there is little to be gained by complaining about them. Distinguishing between legitimate and illegitimate reasons for reading a good book just creates another binary, with its own form of “heavy-handed moralizing”. There is no wrong reason for doing the right thing.

[https://www.killyourdarlings.com.au/article/the-aggressive-commodification-of-cosy-asian-fiction/?fbclid=IwY2xjawKANN5leHRuA2FlbQlxMQBicmlkETFndEpCUE1WcUdVeXJYZiRYAR7zldmOORR9JO\\_Vea0NMa3mD8Eyx8GTf8Kb2taE0aouDEbKQIDMwBPUwqzhHQ\\_aem\\_xhdHDQM\\_nB9oFg0da1EKysQ](https://www.killyourdarlings.com.au/article/the-aggressive-commodification-of-cosy-asian-fiction/?fbclid=IwY2xjawKANN5leHRuA2FlbQlxMQBicmlkETFndEpCUE1WcUdVeXJYZiRYAR7zldmOORR9JO_Vea0NMa3mD8Eyx8GTf8Kb2taE0aouDEbKQIDMwBPUwqzhHQ_aem_xhdHDQM_nB9oFg0da1EKysQ)

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### ***We are all Little Red Hens nowadays***

As I’m sure you know, the punchline of the little red hen story, “I guess I’ll just have to do it myself” becomes a kind of mantra describing the little red hen’s predicament, as she requests help for each task in the sequence of making bread. It turns out that this condition seems to apply just as well to the sequence of critical tasks in publishing a book.

Take editing, for example. You might think that if you sign a book deal with a prestigious “Big Five” publisher, you’re guaranteed to get a quality editing job without having to pay up front. Think again. I recently finished a work of fiction from a prestigious Big Five imprint, in which I discovered numerous “continuity errors” as they are called in the movie business.

Continuity errors are temporal inconsistencies that occur in a story, like where someone is wearing tennis shoes on page 34, but is barefoot on page 35, without any possibility of a reasonable explanation. Even more embarrassing, I found a few grammatical errors.

Sadly, editing is one of the few things you really can’t do for yourself. But what this lesson means to me is that you may want to find a way to backstop your editor. Maybe that is what friends are for.

We are also Little Red Hens when it comes to building demand for our books. Sales volume is the one single factor that builds success for a writer, even beyond quality. Your publisher and/or agent will tell you this themselves. They can try to help, but their resources are

limited. So is their reach.

You are the only one who can really promote your book effectively – you have the passion, you know your audience, you know how to penetrate the right social media platforms. And you have the time – if you are willing to prioritize. In the coming months, I'll be sharing some ideas with you on how it can be done.

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### ***Stephen King on writing***

I've been reading his book *On Writing* lately, and I thought I'd share some of his advice with you. You can argue about whether his work is Nobel Prize material, but you can't argue with his success (remember what I just said about sales volume?)

*+ What are you going to write about? . . . Anything you damn well want. Anything at all . . . . as long as you tell the truth.*

*+ Fear is at the root of most bad writing.*

*+ The more fiction you read or write, the more you'll find paragraphs forming on their own. And that's what you want.*

*+ Use the first word that comes to your mind, if it is appropriate and colorful.*

*+ The road to hell is paved with adverbs.*

*+ Little by little, I found the beat again.*

[https://www.amazon.com/Writing-Memoir-Craft-Stephen-King/dp/1982159375/ref=sr\\_1\\_1](https://www.amazon.com/Writing-Memoir-Craft-Stephen-King/dp/1982159375/ref=sr_1_1)

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