

Observations from Kyoto – June 2025

*“Silence of the tongue, silence of the imagination,
silence of the memory, silence of the will.”*

Teresa of Avila

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Welcome to *Observations from Kyoto*. 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.

This newsletter had its beginnings as an internal news digest for *Writers in Kyoto*. Since then, we’ve spun off the portions of more general interest for a wider audience, although we still draw heavily on the material provided by its members. We appreciate your feedback, especially any requests you might have for a discussion of specific topics. Send your feedback via email to kyoto_observed@shimenawa.org.

Talking About Silence

The *Writers in Kyoto* website this month features a discussion of the benefits of silence, based on visits to a Benedictine monastery in Big Sur, where the person being interviewed has gone for the past 35 years.

A key theme of this interview is that the pursuit of silence is open to anybody – you don’t need a formal religious affiliation. This is very true, and attested to by the popularity of various practices of silence or near-silence, from zazen to transcendental meditation, among people of all sorts. Here’s a short poem about just that, written by a friend who was struggling to reconcile his experience with his rapidly evaporating religious affiliation –

No weighty tomes
No dietary restrictions
No splitting hairs and splitting them again

Just footprints in the snow
Already melting
In the warmth of a bright clear sun

A second theme is that silence is good for you. Again, this is incontestable. I personally use a form of silent meditation in my own life when things are threatening to spin out of control, and have found that it generally drops my blood pressure by some 10 to 20 points, depending on the degree of agitation. You can't argue with this sort of effectiveness.

Granted, then, that silence has such beneficial effects, the thoughtful person is driven to ask a deeper question. Is silence simply instrumental? Is it anything beyond just good medicine? The interview hints at an affirmative answer, namely that "most of us sense that there is something more," and that silence is "a way to see what is truly real".

This is a very important question, because it brings us right up to the doorstep of the transcendent (a term we can use to refer to this "something more", in all the different modes we experience, both secular and sacred). As the interview makes clear, a glimpse of the transcendent is open to us all. And that one glimpse invites us to dig deeper, commands us perhaps. A mere voyeuristic peek through the window shades cannot possibly satisfy.

Is this "silence" we seek the *sunyata* of Mahayana Buddhism, the very ground of our being from which all things take form? Or is it more like an overshadowing, a darkness that masks the unbearable light of encounter with another Being, as in the "dark night of the soul" of John of the Cross? Or is it both – a mystery whose Heisenbergian indeterminacy demands experience even as it defeats analysis?

If it is literally a mystery of cosmic proportions, doesn't it represent the most urgent priority we can think of? Even if our discoveries are idiosyncratic? Even if we can't carve it up into Aristotelian categories? Don't we desperately need to align ourselves with its nature and purpose? Isn't this, perhaps, the way out of many of the impasses we face as a collective humanity – to acknowledge the transcendent in all of our lives, without arguing over whether it is fish or fowl?

But how do we go about that? I once posed that question on a silent retreat of my own. My interlocutor was a Trappist monk, who explained that if you could get your arms around the transcendent, it wouldn't be very transcendent, would it? But if you could never even come close enough to catch a glimpse, it couldn't possibly have much meaning for our lives. In other words, he informed me with a mischievous gleam in his eye, it was essentially "a game of hide and seek". The story is recounted here: <https://shimenawa.org/many-paths/hide-and-seek/>.

The pursuit of silence begins in wonder but ends in paradox. Zen koans articulate this clearly, in the same playful vein as that Trappist monk. Paradox invites play – perhaps the highest form of play. Perhaps paradox is even the essence of play itself. And that helps to explain why the most spiritually advanced individuals I've met in my life always – always – have the spirit of play about them.

<https://writersinkyo.com/2025/05/16/nonfiction/on-silence-a-conversation-with-pico-iyer/>

Canceling Lady Murasaki

Writers in Kyoto member Yuki Yamauchi has been doing some research on the Japanese film industry during the period around World War II, and came up with this cautionary tale about the causes and consequences of censorship, specifically with respect to Akira Nobuchi's movie *Murasaki Shikibu*. What makes this tale fascinating is that it's difficult, if not impossible, to imagine a subject less controversial than the life of Murasaki Shikibu. But maybe that's only because I'm not a censor myself, so I don't have a censor's mentality.

The authorities at the time apparently deemed it so, and demanded that some 800 meters of film (around 30 minutes by my calculation) be cut. Interestingly, this included any scenes that involved Fujiwara no Michinaga, and touched on his complex relationship with Murasaki. And therein may lie a clue as to what was going on here.

But first, some historical background. Murasaki was born into one of the less influential branches of the Fujiwara family. Somewhere in her early to mid '20's, she was married to Fujiwara no Nobutaka, who was likely around 15 to 20 years older. Nobutaka died only two years later, leaving Murasaki widowed with a daughter. She never remarried.

After raising her daughter quietly for 3 or 4 years, she entered the service of Empress Shoshi.

She may have already begun writing the *Tale of Genji*. Some accounts credit her great-uncle Fujiwara no Koresuke with assisting in this arrangement. Others credit Fujiwara no Michinaga, father of Shoshi and perhaps the most powerful man at court.

In neither case is there any strong evidence of a dalliance with Murasaki, although Michinaga had a reputation as an incorrigible ladies' man. In fact, in many ways Murasaki seems to have behaved with reserve and decorum, especially when compared with her rival Sei Shonagon, who seemed to get every bit as much enjoyment from spurning her suitors as she did from entertaining them. A comparison of their respective poems in the *Hyakunin Isshu* (a collection of 100 poem from some of the most famous poets in the Heian Period) is illustrative.

Murasaki's poem is a wistful account of a dreamlike encounter with an old schoolmate.

*Once we were so close
that friend and I—
a glimpse I saw? A memory?*

*Amid the gathering darkness,
a moon obscured by clouds.*

Shonagon's poem on the other hand rejects a suitor with double entendre that still has the power to shock, even to our jaded modern ears:

*Deep in the night, pretense of a rooster's crow
might fool an enemy, or even just a friend—*

*but do not dare to think
mere imitation of a cock
will open up the gate that's tightly shut.*

Both translations are from my forthcoming edition of the *Hyakunin Isshu*, <https://www.amazon.com/One-Hundred-Poems-Old-Japan/dp/4805319232/>.

Given these facts, one is forced to wonder what all the fuss was about. Clearly Nobuchi went to great lengths to illustrate Murasaki's virtue, even so far as to fabricate fantastical episodes such as an approach by her uncle Koresuke, simply in order to allow for Murasaki to him down. Yet in the end, it was her encounters with Michinaga that formed the core of the censor's objections. Why?

The ostensible reason, as articulated by the censors themselves, was that these encounters

were somehow disrespectful of the Imperial throne. Since we don't have access to the actual scenes that were cut, we can't determine the veracity of their claims. But they don't really make sense once we try to parse them out.

The Fujiwara were in actuality the puppet-masters of the emperors, having created a revolving door that forced each emperor in turn onto the throne around age 5, and then forcing him out just short of 30, before he attained the maturity to constitute a threat to the very real power behind the throne. And, as if adding insult to injury, when the emperor married he was essentially forced to mingle his DNA with Fujiwara DNA, courtesy of a bride carefully selected by guess who?

In other words, careful attention to Michinaga's role suggests a different reason – it was Michinaga's very usurpation of the imperial prerogatives which was in itself suggestive, sailing too close to the wind, as it were, too close to the wartime administration's hijacking of Emperor Showa's regime. Always in the name of the imperial throne.

Furthermore, given what we know about both Murasaki and Michinaga, it almost beggars belief to think that Murasaki would not have gotten the better of her "better" in any encounter that required wit or agility. This was an era, generally, where women frequently outshone their male counterparts when it came to displays of wit, and Murasaki was no ordinary woman. Michinaga, on the other hand, was quite likely to be arrogant, pretentious, and a bit of a buffoon when it came to confronting her.

As an unmarried woman at court, and one who had achieved a certain measure of prestige (her Tale of Genji was already quite a stir just three years after joining the service of Empress Shoshi), she could expect propositions to occur with great frequency. And as a single woman at court, it would likely have been in her interests to play along with some level of flirtatious repartee. But when it comes to moviemaking, one can easily surmise that Nobuchi found it impossible to play these scenes straight – that his sense of integrity required him to show off Murasaki in a way that disadvantaged Michinaga.

So there we have a possible explanation for this mystery – by showing herself to be Michinaga's superior in wit, intelligence and erudition (unlike most Heian women, Murasaki had actually studied the Chinese classics), she would inevitably convey a certain amount of disrespect for Michinaga, which would redound to the disadvantage of his latter-day surrogates, the wartime administrators. These scenes had to be cut, and with their cutting, the movie itself was eviscerated. This is all speculation mind you, but as we like to say in the analytics world, it fits the data.

<https://writersinkyoto.com/2025/05/04/nonfiction/censorship-in-wartime-japan/>

Kyotographie 2025

Kyoto Journal offers a survey of some of the artwork on offer at this year's Kyotographie exhibition. Although the formal exhibit schedule ended nearly a month ago, the Kyotographie website (<https://www.kyotographie.jp/en/>) offers an overview of several exhibits. The exhibits themselves displayed an interesting array of creative sparks, from a meditation on very elaborate hairstyles, to a retrospective of the most important images presented in *Kyoto Journal* that includes a video by Felicity Tillack and Jon Einarsen (see below).

Perhaps the most innovative approach is described as “performative self-portraiture”, where the artist uses photoshopping technology to interpose themselves into photos ranging from real-life pictures of 1950's America to Indian mythical epics such as the Mahabharata and the Ramayana.

I find this approach intriguing to the point of temptation – personally, I'd love to paint myself into a picture as Moses leading his people out of Egypt, or as a guest lecturer in the magisterial group portrait *School of Athens*. But therein lies the rub – at what point does this sort of work cross the boundary between “challenging expectations of what is considered art photography” and mere self-indulgence, even to the point of narcissism? It's an honest question. I don't know the answer, but I'm pretty sure it's worth thinking about.

https://kyotojournal.org/heartwork/the-humanity-of-kyotographie-2025/?fbclid=IwY2xjawKIMWxleHRuA2FlbQlxMQBicmlkETF4RW5tajdwZzhwWmtuaDdxAR6U8UmE9YiA6Om3Pz-DOi-9HI7hUtl_1h9_xGzYYinTEija6aw7Q82lkvSGmA_aem_eUfmYphERs2Gucl27431lw

Book Promotion – The Blowup of the Blurbs?

Conditions in the business of publishing and promoting books continue to change rapidly. A recently posted article from NPR helps to detail one of the most recent – the shifting state of the blurb.

Once a mainstay of book promotion, blurbs are those one or two sentence endorsements you often see on a book's cover, or inside its first few pages. Most books seem to have between one and three blurbs, although I've seen books with blurbs that go on for pages and pages.

I can't say I've ever bought a book because of a blurb, and I suppose the reason is that I find it difficult to believe that busy writers actually take the time to carefully read the books they write blurbs for. One author is quoted as saying it takes as long as 12 hours to read a book, but even that doesn't seem sufficient, and I continue to suspect that most blurb writers simply scan the book.

It looks like Simon & Schuster finds itself in agreement with me, as its publisher recently announced the imprint would no longer require authors to supply blurbs. One factor seems to be that many well-regarded authors are suffering from "blurb fatigue" and have taken a hiatus from providing blurbs. Frustration is a factor, as some authors cite situations where they complied with a blurb request, only to find that their blurb did not make the cut.

As the article notes, blurbs are most important to debut writers who lack sufficient literary history to afford other means of evaluating a book's quality before diving in. So the demand for blurbs is not likely to completely disappear any time soon.

Nature abhors a vacuum, of course. Which increases the likelihood that non-authors will be recruited to write them. Enter that new breed of book aficionado, the social media influencer.

The power of this new breed of influencers is not to be underestimated. Eric Oey of Tuttle recounts how sales of their book *Japanese Death Poems* spiked after it was mentioned on one of Joe Rogan's podcasts. In most cases, however, social media influencers tend to be focused on genre fiction, Tuttle's example notwithstanding. Writers of non-fiction and literary fiction are likely to have a harder time finding an influencer who covers their territory.

As always, there remains the challenge of getting the influencer's attention, which may prove to be marginally easier than getting the attention of a *New York Times* book reviewer because of their specialized genre focus, and their reputed lack of a Big Five bias. But the challenge will still be there. Welcome to the future.

<https://www.npr.org/2025/05/21/g-s1-67581/books-social-media-booktok-bookstagram?fbclid=IwY2xjawKtFYZleHRuA2FlbQIxMQBicmlkETFqaDZ5R3hUZDBtVmdXbHI4AR>

Odds and Ends

Another casualty of COVID. It used to be you could walk nearly anywhere in Kyoto, and it wouldn't be long before a taxi would appear for you to grab. That seems to have changed with COVID. It's a lot longer between cabs these days, especially in the outlying areas. Many factors have been blamed – rising energy costs, a shortage of drivers, and an increasing reluctance to take taxis for reasons of hygiene.

Nowadays, the “best practice” is to get a ride-hailing app for your cell phone and call for a taxi in advance. If you have an Uber app, it will bring you a taxi. Similarly for Japan's GO taxi system. Even the surviving old-line taxi companies like MK are now providing apps. Technology marches on – aided and abetted by that most unlikely of bedfellows, the humble virus.

My brand of sumo. Watching the summer sumo *basho* (tournament) this May, I was struck by the interviews with various winners throughout the two week period. When asked about their prospects, or about a specific opponent, they would invariably respond with a comment like “I don't think about that. I only want to focus on executing my brand of sumo.”

I'm sure I've seen similar mantras among athletes in the US, but for some reason, that single phrase, “my brand of sumo” has gotten stuck in my head. Not bad advice for an aspiring writer, I think. Not bad advice on how to live your life, even.

Upcoming Events

[June 13] *Comparative Law in Japan.* For centuries, if not millennia, Japan has been renowned for its ability to adopt useful ideas from other countries, adapt them, and make them uniquely Japanese. Examples abound, from baseball to Zen, but it's difficult to find a case study in adaptation more compelling than the story of how Japan executed a wholesale pivot toward the Western system of law during the Meiji Period.

This Friday, Andrea Ortolani from the Kyoto Italian School of East Asian Studies (ISEAS) will be giving a lecture on just how this happened. The talk will be in English at 6pm Kyoto time, at the ISEAS building on Kita-Shirakawa, but you can also attend via Zoom. For details, see <https://iseas-kyoto.org/en/lezioni/e6468>

[June 16] *MISHO Artist Residencies*. Res Artis, which bills itself as a worldwide network of arts residencies, announces two 30-day residencies in in Fujino, Kanagawa Prefecture, from August 26 to September 24, and from September 30 to October 29. Fee is 1400 euros, which includes a private room in a shared house, studio space, and a garden. Deadline for applying is June 16 [Private FB page, June 1].

<https://mishofujino.org/> More

info:<https://docs.google.com/.../1E8GBf90f6U LDLTrGURdUzJi.../edit>

[June 17] 17th International Conference on the Short Story in English. This year's conference will be held in Killarney, County Kerry, and will focus on discussions about what makes good short story writing unique, as opposed to the simplistic formula that short stories are just fiction that is too short to be a novel.

Judging from the conference announcement, the great Irish short story writers such as Frank O'Connor, Mary Lavin, and even Joyce himself will be sources of inspiration for an approach to short story writing that focuses on the removal of non-essential verbiage in order to enhance with "seductive precision" the "transfer of emotion" (Joyce) from the individual experience (as related in the story) to the reader.

An astonishing variety of writers around the globe appear have attended this conference in the past, with plentiful representation from countries as diverse as Canada, New Zealand, and even China. WiK member Suzanne Kamata attended recently, and found it to be quite stimulating. I don't doubt that.

https://advantagepco.eventsair.com/icsse?fbclid=IwY2xjawlyDJxleHRuA2FlbQIxMQABHXaYevyF8fl-4U_BLKA7Qf8p0oz_bLMZ8T0qkUDHTCDDmVKuo9n5k1DavA_aem_-8qYmyutko9zQRysuNfgbg

[June 25] *Paper Movies*. The Yanai Initiative is hosting a screening of "paper movies" at the Kyoto Prefectural Center for Arts and Culture (Kyōto Fumin Bunka Geijutsu Kaikan) on Kawaramachi at Kōjin-guchi between Marutamachi and Imadegawa on June 25. Paper movies are an ancestor of anime, films drawn on paper, not celluloid, and run through a projector. Music and a benshi narrator will accompany the films. Fans of anime will especially be

interested. Doors open at 4:30 pm. Tickets are ¥2,000, ¥1,000 for students [Private FB page, June 2]

<https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=10171833548895473&set=gm.3932773133650215&id=1538835923043960>

[August 1] *Kinema Club Conference for Film and Moving Images from Japan*. This year's topic is "gender and sexuality". The conference will run from August 1 through August 3. Sessions will include panel discussions, film screenings, and post-screening discussions. Session proposals due April 14 – see under "Opportunities – Writing and Publishing" below. [Private FB Page, March 20].

[November 29] *Japan Writers Conference*. The 2025 conference will be held in the Mitaka area of Tokyo at the International Christian University. The conference itself is free, but participants need to find their own lodging. This year's Tokyo location should make that significantly easier than 2024's Fukushima, where there was only one hotel less than a half-hour train ride away. <https://japanwritersconference.org/>

Opportunities – Paid Gigs

[No deadline posted] The Department of International Studies, Doshisha Women's College (Kyotanabe campus) is looking for a part-time lecturer to teach the two classes beginning Autumn 2025 – Inbound Tourism and Tourism Studies. Classes are currently scheduled for Mondays at 4th and 5th periods, to be taught in English. However, there is room for negotiation on both counts. Please contact Maria Correa by email for further details or to discuss the position: mcorrea@dwc.doshisha.ac.jp.

Opportunities – Writing and Publishing

[No deadline posted] *Deep Japan*. Deep Japan is a website that offers stories of authentic experiences of Japan from those who have lived here for at least 3 years. In general the posts are quite short, and the photos are exquisite, which make for a quick and rewarding browsing experience [Public FB page, May 12]. To view the site, visit <https://deepjapan.org>.

To register as an author, go to <https://deepjapan.org/regist/>.

[Every Month] Tricycle Magazine Haiku Challenge. Each month, the Buddhist journal *Tricycle* sponsors a haiku contest based on a selected seasonal word. Last time I looked, the seasonal word was “autumn wind”, but you should check their website before submitting. The contest ends at 11:59pm US Eastern time on the last day of the month. <https://tricycle.org/haiku/>
