

Observations from Kyoto – August 2025

© Michael J. Freiling, 2025. All rights reserved. Permission to publish brief quotes or excerpts is hereby granted, provided the quote or passage is attributed as follows: “Michael Freiling, in *Observations from Kyoto*”.

Welcome to *Observations from Kyoto*. Each month, *Observations* contains a variety of short articles, primarily related to Japanese history, literature, and culture, with a focus on Kyoto and the Kansai area. We also include topics of interest to writers generally.

Your feedback is appreciated, especially any requests you might have for a discussion of specific topics. Send your feedback via email to kyoto_observed@shimenawa.org.

Listen to my interview in the “History of Japan” podcast series.

Isaac Meyer hosts a podcast on the history of Japan that is listened to “even in Kyoto” as Basho might have put it. His August 15 podcast is an interview with yours truly about the *Hyakunin Isshu* – see “Recent Publications” below.

<https://isaacmeyer.net/2025/08/episode-590-an-interview-with-dr-mike-freiling/>

NOTE: If you encounter technical difficulties loading this page, you can still find and listen to the podcast via the main index page: <https://isaacmeyer.net/the-history-of-japan-podcast/>

Do AI’s need us more than we need them?

In what I take to be a gesture of support, *Asahi Asia Japan Watch* reports that rival Yomiuri has filed suit against Perplexity AI to cease and desist from utilizing Yomiuri content in training its devices.

The copyright protection issues seem so obvious as to barely warrant a nod. There is no (at least not yet) literary version of “eminent domain” that allows for the intellectual property rights of authors and other content developers to be vacated. The countervailing argument,

that there is some societal benefit to be gained from training LLM's (large language models), seems irrelevant. Nobody is talking about a halt to model development. At bottom, it is simply a dispute over how the spoils are to be split.

Behind the legal contention, however, lies a point that I suspect has not been adequately considered, namely that these lawsuits reveal the extreme dependence of AI-based content on content that was first developed by humans, or EI's – *embodied intelligences*, as we might call them.

Let's perform a simple thought experiment. Suppose an LLM were built that had absorbed all written material available to the human race, on all media, in all languages. Everything. What a wonderful LLM that might be, but what happens next?

Barring innovations in LLM architecture, training would come to a screeching halt until new consumable content can be produced. And it could proceed only at the pace which new content is created. In the short run, this completely depends on human creation.

What about the longer term? It's easy to imagine sending AI's off to pursue new scientific and mathematical discoveries, where both the questions and the data can be digitized and processed. It's also possible to imagine AI's spinning out endless variations of genre fiction – romances, spy thrillers, etc. by rearranging settings and plot elements. Immortality of a sort for Tom Clancy and his ilk, if he hasn't already achieved it.

However, there remain whole areas of human knowledge that depend on embodied experience. The sights, sounds, smells, of the erstwhile "real" world. The insights that proceed from those sensory experiences. These are not even easily characterized, much less emulated. And in this domain, LLM's will (for a long time at least) be hostage to the embodied intelligences who alone can produce this material.

<https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/15956803>

Convenience Store Woman – Are we all “on the spectrum” nowadays?

With the 2013 publication of the DSM-V¹, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) eliminated the term “Asperger's” as a diagnostic category, replacing it with the more scientific sounding “Level 1 Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD),” referring to the degree of support a person needs to function in society. At level 1, some support is required, but not as much as level 2 or level 3. Support can include social assistance (e.g. reminders, coaching) or more

structured accommodations in the classroom or workplace.

There is no reason, of course, to believe that the ASD population sorts itself neatly into levels. More likely, it represents a continuum – one that can extend downward to a level where support, as the APA defines it, is no longer necessary, and the subject is no longer of diagnostic interest.

Despite being able to function without support, the person may still face challenges similar to those found at higher levels. Such challenges primarily center around difficulties with social interaction – understanding the emotions of others, reading social cues, and responding appropriately.

What does the social world look like to these “Aspies” (as they like to call themselves)? I can speak from first-person knowledge, having recently been diagnosed as an Aspie myself. The history of interactions that led to my discovery began way back in the fifth grade, when my teacher asked me “Why can’t you just be normal?” It was concluded just last year. I can’t tell you what a relief it was to learn that, after all, I was not a narcissist or a sociopath as some had claimed – just an Aspie.

So what does the social world look like? Aspies tend to feel safest when following a set of well-defined rules. Without them, we tend to feel cut adrift. The social world appears as a place where everybody else has received a copy of the rulebook. But not us. We observe others appearing to follow the rules effortlessly, and we often feel the sting of disapproval when we unknowingly violate them. Not grasping the rules instinctively, we are forced to launch ourselves on a desperate quest to figure them out by any means at our disposal.

This sort of quest forms the story line of Sayaka Murata’s *Convenience Store Woman*². Whether Murata intended to portray her protagonist Keiko Furukura as an Aspie or not, Keiko’s escapades will ring a bell with many Aspies, who are likely to find this a very funny book.

Let’s start with Keiko’s desire to simply be a “cog in the machine”, a desire that would represent the very quintessence of anathema to most normies (Aspie shorthand for those who are neurotypical). Who would ever wish for such an awful fate?

I’ll tell you who in a minute. But first we need to talk about exactly what sort of cog Keiko is referring to. To a normie, the term conjures up the image, well, of a cog. – rotating through mindless tasks with meaningless impact – no way to live a life.

But that is not what Keiko means by “cog”. To Keiko, the cog is a gear smoothly meshing with other gears as they cooperate in their rotational duties to accomplish some small but essential task as smoothly and effortlessly as possible. Keiko’s desire is to succeed in a job that requires little more than a simple set of “restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior,” another diagnostic indicator for ASD.

Being a successful cog also requires social interactions that are commensurately smooth. It’s this social smoothness that Keiko longs for – the ability to emulate typical human behavior sufficiently to grease the wheels and mesh effortlessly with the normies. As Keiko puts it . . .

At that moment, for the first time ever, I felt I’d become a part of the machine of society. I’ve been reborn, I thought. That day, I actually became a normal cog in society.

The novel teems with vignettes describing Keiko’s stratagems to align with the normie milieu. Learning to mimic the vocabulary and voice inflections of her co-workers. Discovering their favorite shops so she can buy similar fashions. Forcing herself to go to social gatherings where she studies the patterns of normie interaction in minute detail.

Keiko doesn’t run on emotion. Her reactions are analytic and emotionally neutral. She is puzzled by the strong reactions of others. But she quickly learns to add similar expressions indicating surprise, shock, or even outrage to her mimetic repertoire.

Her copycat behavior is immediately recognizable to most Aspies, who are likely to chuckle in recognition. “Fake it till you make it” is the order of the day. This exact recommendation, in so many words, is frequently offered by therapists to their Aspie patients. I’ve occasionally been the recipient myself.

But despite the strenuous exertions in her quest for normality, there are two salient characteristics of her situation that cannot be resolved so easily – the lowly economic status of her part-time convenience store employment, and the fact that she is not married. Elevating her economic status, or establishing herself as a respectable married woman would provide her with the cover story she needs to establish a solid position in her social circle.

But her job at the *combinì* (convenience store) is something she is quite happy with. She has invested a lot of time in figuring out the rules. She follows them with gusto. She has no intention of giving up what she has worked so hard to earn.

The second of these conditions – her un-partnered domestic life – is the one that she decides to fix. A man named Shiraha gets a job at the *combin*i. He is a strange fellow. Obsessed with finding a woman, he stalks customers he is attracted to, but is rude to anyone who fails to spark his interest, Keiko included. And he is constantly spouting a low-budget version of evolutionary biology:

The youngest, prettiest girls in the village go to the strongest hunters. They have the strongest genes, while the rest of us just have to content ourselves with what's left.

Shiraha is easily identified as an *incel* (involuntary celibate), although the translator does not use this word. Try as he might, he cannot seem to manage to find a partner. Keiko, in contrast, appears to have no desire for romance, sex, or even much companionship, as hinted at by the absence of gender in the book's Japanese title (コンビニ人間 – *combin*i person). Bodily functions seem distasteful to her, as they might to a young eight- or nine-year-old girl.

Keiko is clearly not attracted to Shiraha. But neither is she as repelled as others might be, due in part to her attenuated capacity for emotional response. Viewing the situation analytically, she senses something of a win-win opportunity. Shiraha clearly cannot take care of himself, and Keiko can use some air cover in her struggle to appear almost normal. So she invites him to move in with her. This suits Shiraha just fine – he is not attracted to Keiko either, and has no designs on her. He need not fear a messy entanglement.

Once Shiraha moves in with her, a fundamental truth about neurodiversity is revealed. As long as you are well outside the pale, people will tend to leave you alone. There is nothing to be done with you. But when you move closer to the boundaries of normality, a surprising new dynamic emerges. People come out of the woodwork with all sorts of hints and recommendations, attempting to push you further in toward the center, where secure and sustainable normality are found. Expectations have been raised, and your very proximity to the border of the category represents a threat to its solidity. Keiko recognizes this . . .

The normal world has no room for exceptions and always quietly eliminates foreign objects. Anyone who is lacking is disposed of.

In a series of comic episodes worthy of Oscar Wilde, the busybodies descend. Keiko's own sister shows up unannounced. Then Shiraha's sister-in-law, whose husband was forced to pay Shiraha's delinquent rent in his previous abode, appears, also unannounced, in hopes of recovering the funds. What these women discover brings them to tears. This is no "relationship" at all, but something more akin to outright fraud, as they see it.

Keiko and Shiraha's win-win proposition has turned out to be a Faustian bargain, as the pressure increases on the pair to at least rectify that other outstanding sore point, Keiko's lack of economic status. Yielding to the pressure, Keiko quits the convenience store, upgrades her wardrobe, and begins the search for a "real job."

The climactic moment approaches as Keiko enters an office building where her first real job interview will take place. Along the way, she passes another *combin*i, with its familiar sounds and well-rehearsed choreography.

Her choice is stark – the *combin*i represents who she is, the fate she has been dealt in life, with which she has made her peace. The job interview represents entrée to normality, or at least the appearance of normality. Something must be sacrificed. Only one road can be taken.

Trying to understand Murata's story, one might be tempted to invoke Joseph Campbell. It's the Hero's Journey once again, albeit in a "small ball" incarnation – Keiko as a Japanese version of Leopold Bloom, striving to meet the challenges of everyday life with pluck and humor. Does her final test represent a victory? Or a crushing defeat?

However, the questions raised by this story go beyond the individual's predicament. Are Aspies really among the problem children of society? Or are they simply a special sort of person whom we should support and treasure, rather than denigrate with our menagerie of epithets, such as *geek*, *nerd*, *tool*, or *dweeb*? Perhaps they are among us for a reason. Perhaps we need them. Perhaps, just perhaps, we cannot do without them. Et tu, Albert? Et tu, Wolfgang? Et tu, Vincent?

Perhaps there are more of them, far more of them, than we imagine. Perhaps we can each remember our own difficulties learning the social cues of normality. Perhaps we have each had to "fake it till we make it" in some area of our life. Perhaps, in other words, we are all "on the spectrum" somewhere. The two million readers who are reported to have purchased this book may just be offering us a clue.

NOTES

¹ *American Psychiatric Association; Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (5th ed.); 2013.*

² Murata, Sayaka; *Convenience Store Woman*; translated by Ginny Tapley Takemori; Grove Press, New York, 2016.

https://bookshop.org/p/books/convenience-store-woman-sayaka-murata/7393087?ean=9780802129628&utm_source=google&utm_medium=pmax&utm_campaign=gift_cards&utm_content=6443417794&gad_source=1&gad_campaignid=16235479093&gclid=Cj0KCQjw8KrFBhDUARIsAMvIApYIoLyn3Do66UnPiypChvMpV-ew-s_z-HYHMDvWH_r55oFwwyE_b-4aAscsEALw_wcB

Wish I'd Written That

A crackpot uncle of his, in Maine, had twice handcuffed himself to heavy equipment to obstruct the construction of cell phone towers. There was a gene Leo wouldn't mind expressing.

But now he was doing that thing he did when a waitress recited the specials – he was trying too hard to pay attention, so he was paying attention to paying attention, not to what was going on.

It seemed to him that he had an invisible handicap, and if buses could kneel for wheelchairs, the world should be able to accommodate him somehow.

. . . as blank as a bodhisattva . . .

David Shafer; *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot*; Mulholland; New York, 2014.

<https://bookshop.org/p/books/whiskey-tango-foxtrot-david-shafer/16439144?ean=9780316252652&next=t>

Odds & Ends

For who the bell tolls. Nagasaki's Urakami Cathedral commemorated the donation of a new bell to replace the one destroyed in the atomic bomb attack of 1945 by ringing both bells. The project that donated the bell was organized and led by a grandson of one of the original Manhattan Project team.

<https://japannews.yomiuri.co.jp/society/general-news/20250808-274393/>

Upcoming Events

[September 19] Nerd Nite Tokyo. A monthly gathering in Tokyo dedicated to esoteric arcana, at a local watering hole. This month's topic will be on the thesis that "mathematics at its core holds a philosophy of intellectual courage that teaches profound lessons about how to approach life." See what I mean? 7pm at the Ryozan Park Lounge in Sugamo. Tickets are 1,000 JPY, or 2,500 if you want to support the effort. <https://tokyo.nerdnite.com/>

[September 27] PechaKucha Night, Kyoto. The term *pechakucha* means something like "buzz" or "chit-chat". A regular gathering in Kyoto that features talks on a wide variety of topics. The topic for this month's event will be "Celebration", in celebration of PechaKucha Night's 15th anniversary. The event is bilingual, so speakers are encouraged to speak in both English and Japanese. Admission is JPY 1,500 and includes one drink. 8pm at the UrBANGUILD art space (<http://www.urbanguild.net/>) on Kiyamachi, just south of Sanjo. https://www.facebook.com/events/30337937155831497/?acontext=%7B%22event_action_history%22%3A%7B%22mechanism%22%3A%22attachment%22%2C%22surface%22%3A%22newsfeed%22%7D%2C%22ref_notif_type%22%3Anull%7D

[October 6] 100 Years of Yukio Mishima. In many ways, Mishima was the bad boy of Japanese literature. As an undergraduate at USF, I read nearly every work of his that had been translated into English at the time. Kyoto CIEE (Council on International Educational Exchange) will be hosting a symposium on Mishima and his impact. 6:30pm at the Kyoto Keizai Center, Room 6C. The event is free, but registration is required. <https://forms.office.com/r/ZkLy1yLCKE>

Opportunities – Paid Gigs

[No deadline posted] Program Coordinator - Summer Journalism Study Abroad Program. In the Summer of 2026, the Institute for Education in International Media will launch a journalism study-abroad program in Kyoto, Japan. Students will explore Kyoto's culture, communities, and current issues while producing feature stories, profiles, and multimedia projects. The Program Coordinator will play a critical role in helping students connect with the city, identify compelling stories, and access local sources.

For further information, contact Rachele Kanigel, director, ieiMedia Kyoto program at

rachele.kanigel@ieimedia.com. Type KYOTO PROGRAM COORDINATOR in the subject line.

Opportunities – Writing and Publishing

[October 31] UK National Poetry Writing Competition. The Poetry Society of the UK sponsors an annual poetry competition with a twist – a list of recommended prompts to jump start your creativity. Note that there are two sets of prompts, but the same set of judges.

https://poetrysociety.org.uk/competitions/national-poetry-competition/poetry-writing-prompts/?fbclid=IwY2xjawMYLghleHRuA2FibQIxMQABHp8k45rOIPMWnSPnFnbkmXgtonV0UTcfr17PyR4nKTEd8iHVARLfw5nYtmtv_aem_xvFTlmVk18fYGa8adluTVg

[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. 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 “Perseids”, 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/>

Recent Publications

One Hundred Poems from Old Japan: A New Translation of the *Hyakunin Isshu*. Tuttle’s publication of my translation of the *Hyakunin Isshu* will be available for ordering as of August 26. The translations were 46 years in the making, beginning with a first draft submitted in 1978 to the Luce Foundation as a report on my scholarship year.

Tuttle did an amazing job on the book, which includes full-color illustrations for each poem. You have to hold the book in your hands to appreciate its heft, but it just feels like a classic. It’s a book that you would never remove from your bookshelf, no matter how many times you had to make way for new purchases.

The anthology begins with the flowering of classical Japanese literature in the Nara Period of the early 7th century, continues through its high point in the Heian Period from about 950 to 1050, and ends in the early 13th century as courtly life gives way to 350 years of conflict and turbulence.

It is no surprise that this anthology constitutes the essential foundation of classical literary education all over Japan. Even as adults, most Japanese are still able to remember and recite one or two of their favorites. If you want to understand the original roots of the Japanese view of life, this is a great place to start.

https://bookshop.org/p/books/one-hundred-poems-from-old-japan-a-new-translation-of-the-hyakunin-issu-with-free-online-audio-recordings-michael-freiling/22171386?ean=9784805319239&utm_source=google&utm_medium=pmax&utm_campaign=gift_cards&utm_content=6443417794&gad_source=1&gad_campaignid=16235479093&gclid=Cj0KCQjw8KrFBhDUARIsAMvIApbxNoosr0ZoKyr444qERsJmOSLU7S1sPfMPo58cY7eoRruwDNx4s4saAqYJELw_wcB

No One Knows. It's a long-standing practice in Japanese literature for poets and writers to adopt the voice of the opposite sex in composing their work. For example, poems #21, 85, and 97 in the *Hyakunin Isshu* (see above) are widely interpreted in this fashion. The tradition continues even into the contemporary senryu poems of *They Never Asked* (#29 and 35).

<https://bookshop.org/p/books/they-never-asked-senryu-poetry-from-the-wwii-portland-assembly-center-shelley-baker-gard/19013458?ean=9780870712357&next=t>

In this collection of short stories by the legendary but short-lived Osamu Dazai (1909-1948), the author takes on the character of various women of the early Showa period to deliver "soliloquies" that explore the issues of social alienation and hypocrisy as the country lurches into war. Nearly half the stories in this collection have never before been published in English. Translated by Ralph McCarthy. Published by New Directions (New York), which over the years has published an all-star cast that includes Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams, and which still manages to maintain its independence in an era of radical industry consolidation. 2025. <https://bookshop.org/p/books/no-one-knows-osamu-dazai/21541862?ean=9780811239332&next=t&affiliate=5840>

The Passengers on the Hankyu Line. The Kansai area of Japan, which covers surrounds Kobe, Osaka and Kyoto, is crisscrossed by a network of private rail lines including the Keihan, Kintetsu, and Hankyu. A wonderful feature of both the Keihan and Hankyu lines is that one can ride the faster and more comfortable *tokkyu* (Special Express) trains without paying an extra fare.

Back in 1978, I used to take the Hankyu line from Kyoto to Umeda in Osaka, partly to visit the English language bookstores near Umeda, but partly just to enjoy the view and the ride. This collection of stories by Hiro Arikawa presents vignettes from the far western end of the

Hankyu network, between Nishinomiya and Takarazuka.

Takarazuka is the home of the well-known but recently scandal-plagued Takarazuka Review, which turns the tables on the Kabuki tradition of *onnagata* (men who play the roles of women) to feature shows where all characters are played by women, including the male roles.

One vignette in particular that is likely to interest readers concerns a man who encounters the woman to manages repeatedly to check out a book from the library just before he can check it out himself. The book is reported to have sold over a million copies in its Japanese version.

Translated by Allison Markin Powell. Published by Berkeley, whose credits include the science fiction writers Robert Heinlein and Frank Herbert. The path of acquisitions (Berkeley to Putnam to Penguin) sounds a bit like a baseball double play, landing Berkeley as an imprint of the biggest of the Big Five. Published June 2025.

<https://bookshop.org/p/books/the-passengers-on-the-hankyu-line-hiro-arikawa/22684734?ean=9798217187195&digital=t&affiliate=5840>
