

Observations from Kyoto – September 2025

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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. Feel free to e-mail us: kyoto_observed@shimenawa.org if you have feedback to share, or to request an issue that you’ve somehow missed.

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/>

The Paradox of Nostalgia

One of the delights of translating Japanese poetry is that occasionally you discover an idea or a poetic technique that you were not previously aware of. Among them is a phenomenon I call the “paradox of nostalgia”. Rather than trying to define the term, it’s best to illustrate with an example, taken from our translation of the wartime senryu poems of “They Never Asked”

(<https://osupress.oregonstate.edu/book/they-never-asked>).

*no longer heard –
my father’s
happy drunken songs*

My first clue, as we worked on this poem, came from the blinding realization that Jonan (poet Masaki Kinoshita’s penname) would likely have been deeply embarrassed and distressed when the event first happened. The realization came to me suddenly because several years ago I had had an almost identical experience. My father had come up from the Bay Area for a visit, and we took him to the old Rheinlander restaurant in Portland. In the middle of dinner, he decided to entertain the customers by standing up to belt out a few German drinking songs, with which he was intimately familiar. Personally, I was seized by a deep desire to hide my head under the table.

I don’t feel any nostalgia for that event – I seem condemned to relive the embarrassment every time I remember it. But Jonan’s situation at the time he wrote this poem is markedly different. He, along with over 100 other Japanese-Americans, is forced to live in the cattle stalls of an erstwhile livestock exhibition hall as they await transportation to the camps where they will have to remain throughout the war.

Amid the squalor of the Portland “Assembly Center”, as it is euphemistically called, the poet might be tempted to wax nostalgic about nearly anything, regardless of his feelings at the time. He may have wanted to duck his head under the table also, but now, in a different context, the memory seems to take on a sort of golden glow – it does represent a snapshot of family life, happy for at least some of the participants. So Jonan calls it to mind, likely in an effort to summon up positive memories as an antidote to his current travails.

In short, then, the paradox of nostalgia is the fact that however negative or distasteful an experience might be at the time, in different circumstances it can become imbued with a halo of nostalgia, offering warmth and comfort to the one who remembers.

About two weeks later, Jonan shows us just how well he understands the paradox, by doubling down on this paradox in an even more sophisticated way:

*someday after
Center name cards just might
become nostalgic*

Analyzing the paradox in this case is a bit tricky, so bear with me. In essence, the paradox links the times representing two events, a past event about which one is likely to become nostalgic, and a present event, representing the experience of nostalgia. What Jonan accomplishes in this poem is a sort of “time shift”, as he pushes the present event out into the future, and the past event up to the present. The present event becomes a future event, and the past event becomes a present event.

In the light of this new context, the present experience is unwelcome. This certainly applies to life in the livestock stalls of the Assembly Center. But Jonan's point is that they will survive this experience, however horrific, and in the light of that future time, the former prisoners are quite likely to look back and experience a glow of nostalgia, even about their present unfortunate circumstances. It's not hard to conclude that Jonan's intention is to lift the spirits of the prisoners a bit by means of this concept.

Jonan's poem, then, represents a brilliant piece of psychology. But it also represents a prophecy, one which turned out to be surprisingly accurate. At the Japanese American Museum of Oregon, where we held the book launch for "They Never Asked" in 2023, the exhibit about the Japanese-American incarceration includes a display case with – you guessed it – name cards from the Portland Assembly Center. And as the visitors were browsing through the exhibit, this one display case easily garnered the lion's share of attention, with comments like "There's Yoshida san!" and "Anybody see Yamamoto?" Jonan's speculation had come true.

A quick literature search shows several works by others linking the words "paradox" and "nostalgia". Most of them seem to relate to the paradox of feeling nostalgic about something one ought not to feel nostalgic about – the object of the nostalgia being the cause of the paradox. But I don't seem to see any spotting the fact that this simple paradox is *inherent* in the nature of nostalgia itself, because the experience is internal, rather than externally focused.

On the other hand, we can and do find evidence in the Japanese literary tradition that this paradox was understood and utilized poetically, at least as early as the Heian Period, which is commonly reckoned to stem from 794 to 1185. Fujiwara Kiyosuke (1104 – 1177) articulates essentially the same phenomenon in poem #84 of the *Hyakunin Isshu* (<https://www.tuttlepublishing.com/japan/one-hundred-poems-from-old-japan-9784805319239>):

*I will survive and persevere –
these current agonies
becoming fond and secret memories*

*as early times of tribulation
now I lovingly recall.*

Here, Kiyosuke demonstrates the power of the *tanka* poetic form (5-7-5 || 7-7) to explicitly outline the way in which our paradox works, as opposed to the more constrained snapshot afforded by the shorter *senryu* (5-7-5).

Whether one prefers *tanka* or *senryu* is a matter of taste, of course. In general, I tend to prefer *tanka*, with their greater latitude for dynamism and dramatic structure. But in this case, specifically, I have to grant the laurel wreath to Jonan for capturing such a complex and sophisticated concept in a single

simple sentence.

The Combini Conundrum

Talk about coincidences – hard on the heels of last month’s review of *Convenience Store Woman* comes an article in the Japan Times discussing Seven-Eleven’s percolating strategy to expand into, of all places, the US. Seems the Japanese parent company, “Seven & I Holdings, Ltd.”, saw its stock tank after a Canadian suitor withdrew its bid to acquire them.

It may come as a surprise that the iconic brand is Japanese-owned. It certainly surprised me when I discovered the fact about a year ago. The chain (originally called “Tote’m”) was founded in Dallas in 1927, changing their name to Seven-Eleven in 1946 to highlight the fact that they would be open both early and late. In those days, I guess, 7am to 11pm were considered long hours.

Japanese retailer Ito-Yokado acquired the rights in Japan, opened its first store in 1974, and acquired a controlling interest in Southland Corporation (the parent company) in 1991. There are now over 21,700 stores in Japan, compared with just 13,000 in all of North America

Equity markets worldwide tend to place a much greater value on growth opportunities than on flat but stable profits. But as anybody who has visited Japan recently is aware, growth opportunities there are severely constrained. Combinis are everywhere, and the competition is stiff. In my own neighborhood of Yamashina, I can count at least 7 stores within a 10-minute walk – four Seven-Elevens, one Lawson, and two Family Marts (the three dominant brands). And that’s only the ones I know about!

The key demographic seems to be working people who will stop to pick up an *o-nigiri* (rice ball) or sandwich for lunch, and possibly a quick dinner on the way home. Food sales account for over 68% of revenues. But Japan’s population is in decline (from 128 million in 2010 down to 123 million in 2024, and projected to fall below 120 million in the next year or two) and aging quickly, so new workers may be hard to find.

What’s a poor convenience store chain to do? Expand abroad, of course. And that includes the US, where the parent company is planning to spend a large portion of its expected \$13 billion investment. They also intend to introduce their legendary egg salad sandwiches, which no less a connoisseur than Anthony Bourdain praised as “pillows of love”.

It's an intriguing strategy. As the article notes, matching the food quality and freshness found in Japan will be a challenge, not to mention the delivery logistics. But another challenge is matching up with the car-centric culture of the US. The company seems to be aware of this, having already opened its first drive-thru combini (Dallas) in 2021, in the wake of COVID.

All of this is likely to be good news for us Aspies, who will have more opportunities to land jobs of the kind that Keiko Furukura, the hero of Sayaka Murata's *Convenience Store Woman*, found so congenial. See our August issue (or e-mail us to request a copy) for more on this point.

https://www.japantimes.co.jp/business/2025/09/12/companies/us-japan-style-seven-eleven/?utm_medium=social&utm_type=image&utm_source=facebook#Echobox=1757669591

Wish I'd Written That

One of the real challenges here is the way that AI undermines the human value of attention, and the individuality that flows from that . . . What we stand to lose is not just a skill, but a mode of being: the pleasure of invention, the felt life of the mind at work.

As I write this, my children are building Legos on the floor beside me, singing improvised parodies of the Burger King jingle. They are inventing neologisms. "Gomology," my son announces. "It means thinking you can do it all by yourself. The younger one laughs. They're riffing, spiraling, contradicting each other. The room is full of sound, the result of that strange, astonishing current of attention in which one person's thought leads to another, creatively multiplying. This sheer human pleasure . . . (is) what using AI threatens to erode.

Meghan O'Rourke, *My Summer of Reckoning with ChatGPT*
New York Times, July 20, 2025.

Upcoming Events

[September 27] [AI in Translation](#). The Society of Writers, Editors, and Translators (SWET) will be hosting three online discussions regarding the use of AI in translating. I will be participating

in the first one on September 27. Signup links below:

Sep. 27: The growth of AI in translation, with [Mike Freiling](#) and [Daniel Morales](#)
https://swet.jp/events/event/u_events/1443

Oct. 18: Best practices for using AI assistance in translation, with Alex Queen and [Richard Sadowsky](#)
https://swet.jp/events/event/u_events/1444

Nov. 9: The risks of AI, with Julia Straatman and [Daniel Morales](#)
https://swet.jp/events/event/u_events/1445

[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%22new_speed%22%7D%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>

[October 10] [Globalization of Wine Culture \(17-18th centuries\)](#). 6pm Japan time. Speaker: Joji Nozawa. Hosted by the École française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO) and the Scuola Italiana di Studi sull'Asia Orientale (ISEAS). Co-hosted by Institute for Research in Humanities, Kyoto University.

Drawing on a range of sources, including the archives of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and several contemporary travel accounts from the 17th and 18th centuries, this lecture focuses on two key aspects: firstly, the consumption of wine by European expatriates in maritime Asia, and secondly, the emergence of a local market, primarily in Japan, during the Edo period.

This hybrid lecture will be held on site at the Kita-Shirakawa campus ([registration from here](#)) and via Zoom (<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/82947530025>, meeting ID: 829 4753 0025).

Opportunities – Paid Gigs

[No deadline posted] [Class on Qualitative Research Methods](#). Ritsumeikan University is planning to offer this course at their Osaka-Ibaraki Campus, starting from Spring semester 2026. Schedule is flexible. Contact Nami Yamamoto (English is fine) informally to get details: yamamotonami@gmail.com

[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* is now available for ordering. These 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.

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://www.amazon.com/One-Hundred-Poems-Old-Japan/dp/4805319232/>

The Convenience Store by the Sea. Seems we simply can’t get enough of the combini these days. In this book, Sonoko Machida brings the evolving genre of “magical realism” (see our May issue, or e-mail us for a copy) to an out-of-the-way convenience store in a seaside village in Kitakyushu.

It’s commonplace wisdom in the marketing world that the true “product” customers are willing to pay for isn’t always the item you hand over the counter. Sometimes it’s a sense of exclusivity. Or status. Sometimes it’s just the atmosphere. Consider airport “VIP” lounges, for example.

In this particular convenience store, the true product seems to be Tenderness. The

astonishingly handsome manager has his own fan club. The employees all know you by name. The food is fresh and delicious. It's almost like the store is able to anticipate your needs.

Translated by Bruno Navasky. Published by Orion (paperback) and G.P. Putnam's Sons (hardcover). Orion, whose authors include Quentin Tarantino is an imprint of Hachette. Putnam, whose authors include Tom Clancy, is an imprint of Penguin Random House.

<https://bookshop.org/p/books/the-convenience-store-by-the-sea-sonoko-machida/4dc6a3c86681912c?ean=9798217045433&next=t>

May You Have Delicious Meals. Stories about love triangles are at least as old as the polygon itself, perhaps much older. Perhaps by millennia. But that was then, and this is now, where so many lines have been blurred that it's difficult to ascertain what the word "relationship" means anymore.

Junko Takase's new novel about office relationships brings this complexity to the fore. The male protagonist, Nitani, typically dates what some call "*so desu ne*" girls, after their most common verbal expression, which translates as "that's so, isn't it!", exclamation point included. He connects with one such woman, Ashikawa, and often spends evenings at her place as she plies him with nutritious home-cooked meals.

But sometimes he heads for less reputable establishments, bowls of "pot noodle" which he prefers to Ashikawa's healthy food, and the company of a more aggressive, professionally successful colleague named Oshio. Neither Nitani nor Oshio seem to have much respect for Ashikawa's sweetness, and eventually Oshio solicits Nitani's collusion in efforts to humiliate her. And that's when things get dicey.

Winner of the prestigious Akutagawa Prize. Translated by Morgan Giles. Published by Hutchinson Heinemann, a venerable English firm that dates back to 1887, and is now a Penguin Random House imprint. Hutchinson's authors have included Arthur Conan Doyle, HG Wells, Vladimir Nabokov.

Hutchinson also published the first English edition of Karl Popper's classic work *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, which is best known for formulating the notion that, in order to qualify as scientific, a proposition must be "falsifiable". Yes, you read it right – perhaps I'll discuss that important notion in a future issue of *Observations*.

<https://www.amazon.com/May-You-Have-Delicious->

[Meals/dp/1529153891/ref=sr_1_1?crid=2PBGYLE0M088H&dib=eyJ2IjoiMSJ9.Y3d2g0B7rAKMDAAqOZKftvQ3sXnXucmxT8MeaVzeikZAAd-xQuY4GdcYNQgkEhsjkGb6CJ1wwHKhQsVjc4Z-OFpz2aqz85zmaygV1QtS9PxMfX2wycJVS7fL9ljSXIWJnxnSQheug259LsazmGzd6QKtQ2nfl07gB9SeDEIX-cTgsPauKEmBK9bSx6irREDikgjpgf9vJSZW7b2e9D13h2wXCuAU47_eRVQHBWe1GN3c.tpy6lt5TQtY7QHxV5U7X57YSaoqqDI2iRo6vLKtqM9A&dib_tag=se&keywords=may+you+have+delicious+meals&qid=1758050041&sprefix=%2Caps%2C366&sr=8-1](https://www.google.com/search?q=Meals/dp/1529153891/ref=sr_1_1?crid=2PBGYLE0M088H&dib=eyJ2IjoiMSJ9.Y3d2g0B7rAKMDAAqOZKftvQ3sXnXucmxT8MeaVzeikZAAd-xQuY4GdcYNQgkEhsjkGb6CJ1wwHKhQsVjc4Z-OFpz2aqz85zmaygV1QtS9PxMfX2wycJVS7fL9ljSXIWJnxnSQheug259LsazmGzd6QKtQ2nfl07gB9SeDEIX-cTgsPauKEmBK9bSx6irREDikgjpgf9vJSZW7b2e9D13h2wXCuAU47_eRVQHBWe1GN3c.tpy6lt5TQtY7QHxV5U7X57YSaoqqDI2iRo6vLKtqM9A&dib_tag=se&keywords=may+you+have+delicious+meals&qid=1758050041&sprefix=%2Caps%2C366&sr=8-1)
