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ARTICLE



## Tokyo: city of fires and flowers

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### ABSTRACT

Heidegger pointed out that a minimally meaningful life requires sensitivity to the power of shared moods, which give ‘mattering’ to our lives and meaning to events. As philosophers remind us, the German word *Stimmung* means ‘mood’ in terms of atmosphere or ambiance. Often likened to music or to weather, *Stimmung* is something to which we unconsciously attune ourselves. That cities have their own distinct and discrete smells, weather, feeling, music, and mood is something immediately discernible to anyone who travels around the cities of Europe, where despite their close proximity, the cultures/spirits/aurae/airs/colors are immediately discernible from each other. Looking at the ‘spirit of cities’ through the lens of my own personal life history, I explore the way Tokyo exerted power over my imagination. How did I become a different person in Japanese than I am in English? In what ways did the city impact my character and sense of self? Would I be a different person thinking and dreaming in second-language Chinese? French? Is there any fundamental ‘I’ that is not in some way influenced by culture and language? I aim to ponder these questions by way of a cultural ‘conversation,’ echoing meetings along the Silk Road between West and East, between my young American self and my fully-immersed, Japanese-speaking self, and with the residents, places, seasons, and past observers of the Eastern Capital and other great cities.

**KEYWORDS** Tokyo; megacity; translation; cities as smells; Silk Road; memoir

*It was just after my 22<sup>nd</sup> birthday on Easter Sunday 1991 when I first arrived in Tokyo. Despite having traveled by way of other exotic cities in India and Indonesia, I burst into uncontrollable tears on my first morning and called my mom from a green international payphone, located in the plaza in front of the Seiseki-Sakuragaoka train station in the westernmost reaches of Tokyo.*

*It’s so crowded. Everything is so gray and ugly. Mom, this has got to be the ugliest city on earth.’ After a moment of silence, she encouraged me, ‘Give it a try. It was your father’s favorite place in the world, after all.*

*My father had just passed away after a very long battle with cancer – a battle which had taken a terrible toll on all of us. My mom, my sister and I were utterly shell-shocked. I had left California to study classical Indonesian dance in*

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*Yogyakarta and in Ubud. But running out of money, I decided to follow the advice given by some fellow travelers to go to Japan – where money could be made teaching English. And so I came, not for any interest in the culture or history, but rather to make some money so I could return to Southeast Asia to continue dancing.*

*My mom's words reminded me, however, of how much my father had loved Japan. He admired the people and had spoken often of how orderly, clean and harmonious the cities were – as well as of the extraordinary beauty of the countryside.*

*To a young woman just arrived from Java – with its smiling population and small-town feeling of warmth – no matter where I looked, all I seemed to see was expressionless throngs of people in what appeared to be nothing but a shapeless, formless and relentlessly industrialized urban landscape.*

### **Portrait of the city in famous tropes, motifs and stereotypes**

Compared to Kyoto, Osaka or Nara, Tokyo isn't particularly old, having been established as the seat of power only in the 17th century. Indeed, when Tokugawa Ieyasu first arrived in Edo in 1590, it was not much more there than a sleepy village with the vestiges of an old frontier castle. Unlike Paris or Rome, Tokyo did not steadily increase in size and significance to become the capital, but rather – more like Washington D.C.–it had been strategically established as such. Even its name, Edo (江戸) meaning 'entrance to the bay,' points to its humble beginnings. This all changed in 1603 when the site was specifically chosen to become the base of the Tokugawa shogunate and de-facto capital of the country. Though it would never replace Kyoto as 'heart of the nation,' under the Tokugawa, Edo would become one of the great cities of the world.

The relationship between Tokyo and Kyoto in some ways recalls the ancient rivalry that existed between Carthage and Rome. By the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE, Carthage was the most fabulously wealthy city on earth. A dazzlingly rich, bustling trading entrepôt; it was populated with people from all over the region. Phoenicians, Greeks, Syrians, Persians and others from the Levant mingled with Spanish, Egyptian, and sub-Saharan Africans. A city of maritime merchants, Carthage was a great naval superpower, and its merchants traded in everything from ebony and ivory, to African animals (used for the Roman Games) and skins, hides, lions, elephants and peacocks; as well as tin and silver from New Carthage (Spain), spices, and honey. The city was also known throughout the region for its wine and the wildly popular condiment, garum – sometimes called the tomato ketchup of the times. Facing the sea, with its superb double harbors, on clear days one could almost imagine being able to see all the way to Sicily.

But in reality it was not Sicily facing Carthage – but Rome. Sometimes referred to as twin cities, Carthage and Rome were entangled by an ancient curse and of intertwining destinies, jealousies, and rivalries. Cities indeed have their destinies. And perhaps in a similar way that Rome and Carthage were entangled, so too were Tokyo and Kyoto bound together by cultural rivalry, fate and destiny. For one can hardly understand the history of Tokyo without first looking at Kyoto.

Kyoto had been the seat of imperial and political power for almost 1000 years. Indeed, Kyoto remained the imperial capital even when all commercial and political power had been moved to this new city of the Shogun's on the Kanto Plain.

Before Kyoto, in the 8<sup>th</sup> century Japanese emperors ruled the nation from their capital at Nara. Known as Heijō-kyō (平城京), Nara was the first great capital of Japan. Modeled on the fabulously wealthy Tang dynasty Chinese capital city of Chang'an, Heijō-kyō was a flourishing city at the terminus of the Silk Road. A court city, Nara aimed to emulate all that was elegant, refined and international on the continent. It was a greatly cosmopolitan city, which even today preserves in its museums and temples relics and cultural riches that have long since disappeared in their places of origin. In 784, in order to get out from under the overwhelming power of the Buddhist clergy, Emperor Kammu ordered the capital city moved to Kyoto. The new city was called Heian-kyō (平安京, 'capital of tranquility and peace').

Over the long course of Kyoto's history, while military rulers would establish their own cities in Kamakura or at Edo, Kyoto would remain the heart of the nation. In the romantic imagination, impervious to the tides of history, it was therefore eternal. The name of the city of Kyoto itself means 'capital city' (京の都, kyō no miyako). Not surprisingly, then, we discover that Tokyo gets its own name vis-à-vis Kyoto. For where Kyoto is 'the ancient capital,' Tokyo has only ever been the 'eastern capital' –that is, east of eternal Kyoto. In fact, there is no law that stating Tokyo is the capital of the nation, and even today, some people consider Kyoto to be the legal or official the capital.

Edo, like Kamakura before it, had been established for political reasons alone. In many ways, Edo was the anti-miyako. For where Kyoto was refined, imperial and ancient, Edo was a frontier town of commercial crudeness and military might. The first Tokugawa shogun chose the place for military reasons to be his de-facto capital and moving into Edo castle, the city grew up around the castle.

Surrounding the shogun's castle were the mansions of the daimyo, or 'provincial lords.' The shogun had instigated a system called, *sankin-kōtai* (参勤交代, lit. 'alternate attendance') which stipulated that all provincial daimyo must keep a residence at Edo and spend alternative years residing in the city. In addition, when the daimyo returned to their fiefdoms during the off years, they were required to keep their wives and eldest sons – or heirs – in

Edo. This was a significant demand on the daimyo, since it ensured that daimyo would think twice before rising up against the shogun with their wives and children held hostage in the capital.

In addition to the large mansions of the provincial lords and samurai warriors, this area around the castle was the location of many temples and shrines. Known as *Yamanote*, this hilly district was referred to by scholar Edward Seidensticker (1983) as the 'high city' (i.e., the place where those of high birth lived). The *Yamanote* district was itself encircled by the larger *shitamachi*, or 'low town,' where the merchants and common people lived. In the same way that the daimyo and samurai followed the shogun to Edo, so too did merchants, priests, and other common folk flood the city in order to serve the large bureaucracy that developed as the Tokugawa system of government matured. By the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, Edo had become – along with London – one of the largest cities in world.

*The early history of the city is still reflected in the Tokyo of today. After my tearful phone call to my mother back home in Los Angeles, I had plans to meet Gina, another teacher at the English school where I was to teach. Having never been to summer camp or been a part of a college sorority, this was my first 'instant friendship', which seems to be an inherent part of the expat life in Asia. Gina, who would later introduce me to the man who became my husband, had been assigned by the staff of the school to take me under her wing. We had an early dinner of soba noodles at a restaurant located inside the train station. Gina loved the food and told me that noodles were her favorite. So, I ordered tempura udon and thought it was indeed the best bowl of noodles I had ever had!*

*The best way to see Tokyo is to take a ride on the Yamanote line. And you have to see it during the morning rush. It's the most fun you'll have with your clothes on,' she said with a laugh.*

*The most famous train line in Tokyo, I knew the Yamanote line was a circular rail loop which closely followed the outlines of the old Edo period Yamanote neighborhood, from which it received its name. At 8am the next morning – my third day in Japan – I was lined up at Shinjuku station to board the Yamanote line. It was my formative first experience of the city, and Gina was very clever to have suggested it.*

*Riding up the escalators to reach the Yamanote line platform, I merged into a sea of people. Tokyo is one of the most densely-populated mega-cities on earth. In fact, with 35 million people in the greater Tokyo area, it is the most crowded urban area in the world. And perhaps nowhere is as densely crowded as the early morning rush hour trains at Shinjuku Station, which see an average of 3.5 million passengers every day. As I waited to board a train, I watched as the crowd ahead pressed forward silently. Mostly men, it was an ocean of dark suits. Though it was already spring, snow had lingered into early April and that morning was frigid. I recall the men wearing mufflers and dark coats over*

*their dark suits, leather gloves and many in Burberry scarves as well. In a day before ubiquitous cell phones, it was almost totally silent.*

*What at first glance had appeared as a solid wall of people were in fact orderly columns of passengers filing toward the still-closed doors of the train. I wouldn't make it onto that train and so stood waiting for the doors to shut and the train to depart. It felt almost like a cliché, but as the deafeningly loud bell rang, I watched incredulous as the expressionless station workers in their hats, white gloves and white facial masks shoved the passengers in so that the doors could shut and the train depart. A panicky feeling grew as I noticed male passengers with their cheeks pressed hard against the frigid glass of the train windows.*

*For me, the rush hour trains remain my iconic image of Tokyo. Exceptionally clean, they really do run perfectly on time. Peter Popham (1985) called Tokyo 'a piece of machinery unrivalled in history for its size, complexity and precision'. And indeed, that is just what it felt like: a finely tuned high-precision instrument. Even now – twenty years later and well after the past two decades of economic morass – anytime I leave Tokyo I feel that I am going backward in time. This is a feeling shared by many: one of the well-known tropes describing the megalopolis is 'city of the future.'*

A 'tomorrow land' or 'blade runner city,' this is an image that the Japanese government itself perpetuates.<sup>1</sup> In an online Daily Mail photo-essay from 2011 on the theme of cities of the future, the first project cited was Japan's proposed Shimizu Megacity Pyramid (Van Mead, 2019). A pet government project, the structure if actually built would be 14 times the size of the Great Pyramid at Giza and house 750,000 people elevated above the Bay of Tokyo. My own work for the Japanese government involved a three-year translation project of the government's eJapan strategy, which was an ambitious project to situate Japan as a cutting-edge Internet city of the future.

Tokyo is indeed a city of the future, though maybe not in the way the government thinks. Japan as a whole will have a rapidly ageing society, probably radicalized by a relatively small youth culture, and then a shrinking population. Japan will likely end up with a population 40–50% below its peak. And that is (perhaps) a good thing. A similar pattern is probably true of Europe, and even North America is likely to see a 20% decline in population over the next 200 years. We are used to living in societies where the population grows and at present have no idea or expertise on how to plan for shrinking populations. We are going to have to learn from what Japan does right – and from what it does wrong.

*In addition to the Internet, Japan's high-speed and ordinary rail networks are among the worlds most advanced. Coming from the United States, which remains stubbornly backward in mass transportation, I was enormously impressed and loved riding them ever since that first morning ride on the Yamanote line in 1991. For about two years in 1997–1998, I rode the rush*

hour trains every day to work back and forth. It was a three hour round-trip daily commute. But it wasn't as grueling as it sounds. It wasn't until Shinjuku that things got uncomfortably crowded, but the crowds too had a strangely soothing aspect. I always remembered Gina's words and one just could not feel lonely in such a crush of people. And, for me, the level of quiet sophistication and order was somehow encouraging about humanity itself, for indeed, it was often the case that so crowded were the trains that my body was completely held up by other people. Shoved in as the bell rang, when the doors would shut and the train pulled out of the station, people would take a breath and kind of adjust themselves to small pockets of space that would open up with the closing of the doors or trying to pull one's handbag or even an arm or a leg closer in toward the center of one's body.

The great city of the samurai had become by my day the city of the salaryman – Japan's urban warrior. And as such, I think the trains serve as an icon of their discipline and industry. By that time, I had met and was engaged to Tetsuya (I never did make it back to Java to study dance!) One day, describing how surreal I felt the trains to be, he remarked,

'I always imagine America to be a place where a man or woman can build themselves a boat. And then whoever is able to build the best boats becomes wealthy and successful and that is the American dream – that anyone can just build a boat for themselves. I think in Japan it isn't like that. We Japanese are all in one huge boat together – paddling upstream on some swiftly moving, rough river. And if we don't work together and work very hard, then the boat will flounder, and we will all sink.'

I've often thought of his words when I think about the huge success that is Japan. For a country that has no real resources – no oil, no gas, where even the land itself is mostly mountainous and not appropriate for agriculture – that the Japanese rose from the ashes of World War II to rebuild and turn their economy into the second largest on earth seems all but miraculous. How else to explain the miracle if not by the sheer willpower, tenacity, and brilliance of the population?

And this is – not surprisingly – yet another famous cliché as expressed by James Kirkup (1966), that Tokyo is 'Not so much a city but of some huge, shapeless industrial suburb that is home to one of the world's most charming and attractive peoples'.

Of the cities I've visited, Tokyo perhaps most resembles Bangkok. Starting off unplanned, it evolved haphazardly as a provincial city on the water like Bangkok. Crisscrossed by canals; people once traveled around Edo in boats on the vast network of canal-ways. Because of this, even today, it is not a city of straight lines or broad avenues, but rather is a highly organic circular-oriented city, like Bangkok. A tangle of neighborhoods, this is a city in which Barthes (1970) famously declared, 'the streets have no names' and addresses are not given in geographical order but rather a building has a number depending on

when it was erected. Peter Popham probably described it best when he noted the way oblong plots seem to naturally rise up off what are surprisingly few access streets. Utterly unplanned and once a water city, Tokyo remains strangely and exasperatingly devoid of straight lines, parallel-intersecting streets, and numbered houses. (At least it feels that way to one more used to ordered city planning).

Being almost impossibly unnavigable, it is, therefore, a city of mimetic forms – a city of illustrated maps (絵図), bird's eye views (鳥観図), and famous places (名所).

These days, though, the canals have now been replaced by train lines. People live in clusters along rail arteries, and this is perhaps what has led to the city's most well-known, but also one of its oldest tropes: Tokyo as a "city of villages. Paul Waley of Leeds University wrote in his unsurpassed essay, 'Re-scripting the city: Tokyo from Ugly Duckling to Cool Cat' that:

*Tokyo is a city of villages in contrast to the monolithic and totalizing cities of the West. While western cities are zoned and formal, Tokyo is a jumble of functions and goods for sale. Tokyo is a city of transience and flux as against Western cities, which are built of stone and enshrine their memories in monuments. Tokyo is a textual city where western cities are architectonic and three dimensional (Waley, 2006).*

For a big city, Tokyo neighborhoods have a surprisingly coherent (or 'village-like') feeling; where communitarian values and obligations remain a real force in people's lives – this fact is what informs the title of Washington Post journalist T.R. Reid's book (Reid, 1999), *Confucius Lives Next Door*. Things are changing, of course, but even back in the 1990s, I felt more part of the rhythms of the calendar of events, festivals and gift-giving in my neighborhood in Tokyo than I would have thought possible for such an enormously populated megacity.

It is ironic that the world's biggest city (according to the Guinness Book of World Records) has as its oldest trope this image of a city that is not even a city at all. It was the Victorian traveler Isabella Bird who first is known to have called Tokyo 'a city of villages.' This was in 1878, and since that time, it has become one of the central tropes of the city both in foreign language accounts as well as in Japanese language texts.

Looking back at my journal from 1991, I see how I had jotted down the first words I learned in Japanese:

*Sumimasen*: excuse me, thank you, pardon me

*Yoroshiku onegaishimasu*: please look upon me favorably

*Otagai sama*: We are in this together; thanks is mutual, right back at you

These are, in retrospect, surprisingly sophisticated expressions to learn the first month in a new country. In the months previous in Indonesia, for example, the phrases I memorized revolved mainly around food! In contrast,

the Japanese words were the tools to enable me to take part in the collective group – something prioritized in that country. As Tetsuya had said, *'We are in a boat together and so we have to work together'* (9).<sup>2</sup> For me, Tokyo is the great Confucian city where the communitarian ethics of vertical obligation and social role are preserved so clearly in the ethics of the city's new samurai: the salaryman.

## Scattering flowers, fallen leaves

*Even before I married Tetsuya, I felt drawn into the seasonal rhythms of the neighborhood in a way that was very new to me. And it wasn't just about being embraced by the community. Somehow, I felt myself embedded in the surrounding landscape as well. Our neighborhood was called Mogusaen 百草園 – Garden of a Hundred Grasses. Located in the far west of Tokyo, it was a local train stop on the Keio Line, which is one of the main commuter rails linking the bedtowns of Tama and Hachioji to Shinjuku.*

*Mogusaen's main claim to fame was its plum trees, and when the trees were in bloom, the train schedule of the Keio Line would always be re-arranged to bring in the blossom-viewers from Tokyo. Suddenly becoming an express stop, once the flowers had scattered, Mogusaen would as quickly revert back to a sleepy little local stop. Our year was marked by the plum in February, the sakura in April, the hydrangea in June, and then all the activities surrounding the planting and harvesting of the rice paddies. Mogusaen was a surprisingly close-knit community and within a few months, I knew everyone – and that did indeed mean that 'Confucius lived next door,' since 'belonging' always comes with obligation.*

*Along with Korea, Japan remains one of the great Confucian nations on earth. And perhaps nowhere else do Confucian notions of harmony and social obligations come to take center stage as in Japan. This is even reflected in its old name. The earliest Chinese character used for Japan 倭, pronounced as 'Yamato,' was borrowed from China and meant 'dwarf' or 'submissive.' Not surprisingly, by the eight century, the Japanese had changed the Chinese character for their kingdom to 和 – also pronounced as Yamato – meaning peace and harmony. In addition to Yamato, the character 和 can also pronounced as 'wa' and 'kazu.' Over time, 'wa' became a secondary way of referring to Japan and 'Japanese style.' For example, Japanese food is referred to as 'wa-shoku' 和食 and a Japanese-style room with tatami mats as 'wa-shitsu' 和室. Because of its connotations of harmony and balance, not to mention the 'Japanese spirit of Yamato,' 'Kazu' it is one of the most popular kanji used to write names – for both boys and girls. Tetsuya chose the characters for our son's name, Kazuya 和弥, because it was his hope that Kazy would become a person of harmony, tranquility, and someone capable of working for collective good. If we*

*had had a girl, we might have picked a name using a character from a flower, like Hana, Sakura, Ayame, Chika, Yuri, Kiku, Umeki, etc.*

*Because my first arrival in Tokyo coincided with the blossoming of Japan's famous cherry blossom trees, I would always associate the sakura with my early days in Japan. I had never seen anything like it before! And so I went back to that same international payphone at the train station in Seiseki-Sakuragaoka – the station which itself got its name from the famous blossoms – and called my mom again. I wanted to tell her all about how the entire city was totally drunk on flowers. The flower viewing – called hanami – seemed to be not something done on one's own either, I told her, but rather in groups. During weekdays, businesspeople would gather under the blossoms for long lunches with beer and karaoke and at night there were even more parties – as cherry blossom-viewing by moonlight is considered an elegant way to celebrate the arrival of spring. It was all everyone talked about: the flowers; the beauty of spring; and of transience – or Mujō (無常).*

*I don't think there are many other places in the world where you could find quite so much activity devoted to a blossoming tree – no matter how beautiful. Everyone should experience cherry blossom season in Japan once in their life! Even more astonishing than the beauty of the sakura in full bloom was what happened next, as the flowers faded and then scattered like the rain or like a snow storm! Sakura-fubuki 桜吹雪 means cherry blossom snowstorm, Hana-no-ami 花の雨 means flower rain ... One word poems, I always thought.*

*Tetsuya once explained that the transience of the cherry blossoms reminds us that if the flowers never scattered, they would cease to have the power to move us. They'd be no different from plastic flowers, he said.*

*It's because the flowers last only days that we find them so poignant.*

*I was startled to learn that the young kamikaze pilots who went on suicide missions during World War II were also referred to as sakura. This was an association that happened from almost the beginning of the war, since the young men could expect to be loved even more by the nation for the fleetingness of their lives, just like the flowers. This heightened awareness of impermanence is known in Japanese as mono-no-aware. And this was the first thing I learned in Japan. The lesson of the cherry blossoms, which teaches an attentiveness to the evanescence of the present moment. And it is this that is perhaps the most significant trope of Tokyo: 'city of transience.'*

*People will tell you, living in Japan means living with earthquakes. And it is true. The country accounts for about twenty percent of the world's earthquakes of magnitude six or greater. Being from Los Angeles, I was no stranger to earthquakes. But in Japan, tremors are a weekly occurrence. To most foreign residents, this is terrifying – considering the tremendous number of people who are packed together so densely in the mega-city and is a fact that really hit home after the staggering destruction following in*

the wake of last year's Tohoku earthquake, tsunami and nuclear facility disasters (Ogasawara, 2020). But Tokyo has always been a country of earthquakes and fires – for Japan is one of the most seismically active places on earth – with Tokyo being particularly vulnerable to strong and persistent activity.

For a few elderly Japanese when I first arrived in the early 1990s at least, the memory of the city in ruins, utterly destroyed by a large earthquake is still a vivid one. 140,000 people died in the Great Kanto Quake of 1923. 38,000 alone were said to have been engulfed in an instant when fire swept through a large plot of land where they had fled in a panic. But whereas when Carthage was destroyed, it stayed down, Tokyo, like the ancient mythological phoenix, rose up and immediately rebuilt itself. Then just twenty-two years later, the city was utterly destroyed again by American aerial bombing in 1945. 100,000 people were killed, and the city was burned flat. More than earthquakes, though, it was the constant large fires that came to define the city. Tokyo had always been a city built of wood, and fires during the Edo period had poetically been referred to as *Edo no hana* (the 'flowers of Edo,' from 火事と喧嘩は江戸の花). In addition to likening them to 'flowers,' the people of Edo also referred to these devastatingly frequent fires as 'resembling the autumn leaves.' In contemporary Japanese texts too, Edo is often referred to as the 'city of fire.' One would be hard pressed, in fact, to not find some mention of Tokyo as a city of perpetual destroy and rebuild whenever it is mentioned in texts (no matter what language) – whether it is the city of three hundred years ago or the great megacity of today. This is one of the most enduring images of the city and perhaps best captures the unique character of her people. This is after all the city of Godzilla.

Like London or Paris, Tokyo is made up of people from all over. However, there is a large textual tradition about the natives of this samurai city. Known as Edokko-or children of Edo – these Tokyoites are said to embody the 'spirit of the city.' In contrast to the refinement and elegance of the eternal old capital of Kyoto – Edokko are known for their embracing of transience – and of pleasure in the face of transience. They are also known for their vigorous commerce and vitality despite the constant threat of earthquake and fires; 'scattering flowers and fallen leaves.' This spirit of 'play' in the face of transience was what gave birth to the celebrated 'floating world' (浮世)<sup>3</sup> (11) of the Edo period. And it is what continues to define perhaps more than anything else, this ever-changing, vibrant and uber-cool city today.

## Cool Japan or city at the end of the world?

Being the capital, Tokyo has long been Japan's city of political power and commerce. Indeed, most major companies across all industries today have their headquarters (or at least a very major presence) in the city. During the Taisho period (1912–1926), the city also became the hub of 'modern' culture – again in contrast to the tradition culture preserved in the ancient capital. As I write this, the Japan Society in New York City is holding a significant art exhibition on the Art Deco movement in Japan. And the real star of the show is what is known as the 'modern girl.' Known as 'moga' (モダンガール, *modan gaaru*) in Japanese, one sees her again and again in the art works. With her bobbed haircut and red lips, she is often wearing fashionable flapper-style clothing with lots of jewelry. Maybe she is smoking in a dance club or perhaps she is skiing (also a Western import) but this 'modern girl' is the embodiment of the Tokyo of the times.

It was Junichiro Tanizaki (1925) who coined the phrase in his novel *Naomi*. Having lived in Yokohama before writing the novel, Tanizaki had watched Western cultural imports make themselves felt in the city – from music to dancing; from fashion magazines to silk stockings and high heels. These 'modern' imports created a tremendous stir as critics and intellectuals debated whether Japanese women were being corrupted and wondered if promiscuity and selfishness were not undermining traditional Japanese culture. Tanizaki then watched as Tokyo and Yokohama were utterly destroyed in the Great Kanto Quake of 1923. Moving to Osaka, he wrote his novel about a Tokyo salaryman who attempts to turn his mistress Naomi into the perfect 'modern girl' and Westernized wife. This was an interesting contrast to the *Tale of Genji*, which was set in the ancient capital and had the Shining Prince Genji trying to turn the young Murasaki into the perfect embodiment of classical Kyoto culture.

By the time Tanizaki wrote his novel, the first subway line had been completed and Ginza became the heart of the city. In the words of literary translator Eric Selland:

*During the Taisho period, the real center of Tokyo and the center of action where nightlife and literary life is concerned was Asakusa. The focus shifts to Ginza in 1925 after the first subway line is completed (the Ginza line). The term 'Ginbura' ('walking in Ginza') comes from this era, and in both the visual arts as well as the literary arts it is the 'modern girl' who is right there in the center of everything – whether she is sitting at the cafes smoking cigarettes or sipping on a 'denki buran' ('electric brandy cocktail') in the bars in Asakusa or Ginza. This was perhaps the first flowering of Tokyo's modern culture. One could say that Tokyo modernist urban culture goes back to the Edo period, which is now considered by historians to have been already modern and secular (some even say postmodern).<sup>4</sup>*

In particular, it was the Edo urban lifestyle of the ‘floating world’ in which ‘play’ and pleasure are embraced along with a celebration of transience which generated these images that so loudly echo throughout the city’s history – whether of the Edo dandy (or *flâneur* in Baudelaire’s language) or the Taisho modern girl. This trope is also fundamental to understanding today’s government-promoted **Cool Japan** image which has as its premise the ‘uber-cool’ Tokyo youth culture of anime, street fashion, costume play, video games and high tech, ‘kawaii culture,’ maid cafes and even love hotels. Ironically, while Japan is slipping into the grayness of an elderly dominant demographic, the government is promoting the Japan’s dynamic youth culture.

### City of transience

Simon Sebag Montefiore, in his powerful and intense portrait of Jerusalem, describes the City of Religion – as a holy city that stands at the center of the world. Both holy and harlot, Jerusalem is *‘a place of such delicacy that it is described in Jewish sacred literature in the feminine – always a sensual, living woman, always a beauty, but sometimes a shameless harlot, sometimes a wounded princess whose lovers have forsaken her,’* Montefiore. (2011) writes. *‘Jerusalem is the house of the one God, the capital of two peoples, the temple of three religions and she is the only city to exist twice – in heaven and on earth.’*

Montefiore suggests – and I would agree – that great cities have great foundation stories – but what of Tokyo? A city of villages at the end of the world, Tokyo, never acquired the religious gravitas of Jerusalem nor the moral compass of Rome. Neither eternal like Kyoto nor celestial like Jerusalem, Tokyo never took center stage at all. And, in this way, it is certainly set apart from the cities illuminated in Daniel Bell and Avner de Shalit’s book. For Tokyo lacks the civic resonance of most great cities. While Jerusalem was said to be the navel of Christ; Mecca the center of the world and New York City, center of the universe – Tokyo has always been at the edge of things. A self-proclaimed frontier town of samurai and salarymen, it is a city without a plan.

In looking above at the historical tropes that have been bandied about Tokyo, we are ourselves engaging in a kind of myth-making that is itself self-reflexive; for these metaphors, tropes and clichés – so deeply entrenched in how the world talks about Japan and how Japan talks about itself – have taken on a life of their own. This is because the myths go on to colonize their own reality. Or rather they become stories with the power to possess us. A collaboration between physical form (landscape) and human imagination, the Japanese are particularly adept at this kind of myth-making, and as one quickly learns by popping into any major bookstore in Tokyo, part of the culture of ‘Japanese exceptionalism’ (*nihonjinron*), there are a tremendous number of books on the city’s unique history and its culture – not to mention

a major museum in Tokyo devoted to Edo history. And, this is, as Paul Waley (2006) suggests in his essay, intricately connected to the Japanese notion of transience. That is, precisely because there are so few old structures still standing in Tokyo, we find that the metaphoric aspects of the city, in the form of tropes and motifs, which are embedded in human memory – as the poetic famous places, Confucian predilections and behaviors, and the seasonal calendar – have become the true spirit of the city.

## Atmosphere and the Silk Road

*Cities are smells: Acre is the smell of iodine and spices. Haifa is the smell of pine and wrinkled sheets. Moscow is the smell of vodka on ice. Cairo is the smell of mango and ginger. Beirut is the smell of the sun, sea, smoke, and lemons. Paris is the smell of fresh bread, cheese, and derivations of enchantment. Damascus is the smell of jasmine and dried fruit. Tunis is the smell of night musk and salt. Rabat is the smell of henna, incense, and honey. A city that cannot be known by its smell is unreliable. Exiles have a shared smell: the smell of longing for something else; a smell that resembles another smell. A panting, nostalgic smell that guides you, like a worn tourist map, to the smell of the original place. –Mahmoud Darwish*

Heidegger pointed out that a minimally meaningful life requires sensitivity to the power of shared moods, which give mattering to our lives and meaning to events. He offered that moods are not something that reside inside a person but rather something that a person can be 'in.' That is, moods come over us, overcoming us. The German word famously reflects this, as philosophers like to remind us that *die Stimmung* means 'mood' in terms of atmosphere (or 'ambiance'). Often likened to music or to weather – or how about to smells? – Heideggerean mood wraps itself around our bodies, and it is something to which we unconsciously attune ourselves. Indeed, it is one of the ways human beings have to grasp the way the world discloses itself to us.

François Jullien, in his 2009 book, *The Great Image Has No Form, Or the Nonobject Through Painting*, discusses this daoist concept (大象無形→ from Lao Zi, *Dao De Jing*, Chapter 41) in terms of the connection between Chinese landscapes and moods. Discussing the ancient Chinese notion of wind (風→風教 風景 風姿 風儀 風度 風神 風情 風味), he says:

*The concept of atmosphere was condemned to remain weak in European thought, given that, unlike the activity of cognition, "atmosphere" could not be conceived in terms of the opposition between the objective and the subjective. It is an influence that emerges from beings and things and is valid only by virtue of the impression it produces in us: it e-manates or im-parts and hence circulates inseparably between what is neither "that" nor "us" anymore ... indeed, an atmosphere is diffuse, disseminated, dispersed, elusive .... (Jullian, 2009).*

In this way, then, through one's in-haling and ex-haling, one breathes in landscape, atmosphere and social context and breathes out character, heart, and correct behavior. It is not unlike a Confucian scholar whose meticulous actions – perfectly attuned to the situation – are guided by a contextually-rooted sensibility. A Confucian whose self-cultivation has attuned him to his atmosphere does not just 'feel at home' – he is at home, so that what he feels is what his home evokes in him, as a violin resonates internally with the vibrations of a bow on its strings; the Confucian scholar attunes himself as embodied know-how and the skillful negotiating of shared mood.

That cities have their own distinct and discrete smells, weather, feeling, music and mood is something immediately discernible to anyone who travels around the cities of Europe, where despite their close proximity the cultures/spirits/aurae/airs/colors are so incredibly and beautifully different. Cityscapes – like landscapes – become the particular atmosphere to which those who live in these particular cities become attuned; and more and more philosophers (not necessarily political philosophers though) are turning to this philosophy of 'place' to examine the way in which human beings are embedded in their immediate local surroundings; finding meaning 'there' through shared values and shared mood – and it is this spirit which enables people to say that great cities are all more than just the sum total of their parts. Think, for example, about how the citizens of Carthage at the end of the Third Punic war begged the Romans to spare their city:

'Spare the city which has done you no harm, but, if you please, kill us, whom you have ordered to move away. In this way you will seem to vent your wrath upon men, not upon temples, gods, tombs and an innocent city' (Appianus, 1899).

Looking at this through the lens of a Japanese point of view, on one level, Japan resists the 'spirit of cities' project. It has been said – and I think this is true – that among the nation-states, Japan is unique for its overwhelming homogeneity; such that: race = nation = language = civilization = culture. Due to this intensive homogeneity, despite the fact that people from Osaka or Kyushu or Tohoku have very strong ties to their home prefectures, still perhaps nowhere else are a people so strongly self-identified by their culture as the Japanese. When I was pregnant, I worried about all kinds of things, and I recall one day asking my son's father:

*Shouldn't we think about joining a church or temple or something—so our son has some moral grounding beyond the family?*

*The look on his face should have said it all, but after a moment he said:*

*Our son will be Japanese. And to be Japanese is everything he will ever need. It is not just citizenship—but it is like a religion too. In fact, it's better than a religion.*

*This perhaps explains Japan's 'atheism' – for their culture does indeed provide a strong and highly cohesive moral fabric in the form of shared beliefs, customs and rituals that keeps a person tied to shared identity and group/cultural project; so that while many Japanese claim to be atheist, they have this elaborate set of quasi-religious cultural practices that fills this human need quite sufficiently.<sup>5</sup> And, perhaps this informs the way in which most Japanese strongly self-identify in terms of their civilization – rather than their city or province (in Japan, as in China, provincial identity is significant). However that said, Daniel Bell and Avner de Shalit's 'Spirit of Cities' resonates very naturally with Japanese predilections, I think.*

*I have mentioned my work as a translator above. In addition to telecommunications-content, I have translated a surprisingly large number of documents which have also taken up geographic and cultural rootedness as themes. Whether work for the Japanese government; for academia or for business, again and again I have translated things which have called for a more relativized form of globalization. Themes from my work have included:*

*–From business: a rejection of American-style quarterly performance bottom lines and a commitment to local contribution and corporate responsibility as rooted firmly in plant or business city in the form of a direct rejection of "American-style capitalist practice".*

*–From the government, a commitment to reject American food practices from hormones in American beef to fast food. (The slow food movement is gaining momentum in Japan as well as in Europe. Indeed, Japan is naturally drifting ever-closer to Europe—away from China and the United States in terms of approach and sensibility).*

*–To see art history move beyond the categories and definitions imposed by Kant and the European tradition to embrace a traditional East Asian approach*

*Just last month, in fact, I worked on an academic paper for a philosopher at a university in Tokyo on the topic of the 'internalization of philosophy' in which he argued against 'international standards' (something which are inevitably the standards imposed on the discipline from the European/American tradition). Instead arguing for cultural relativism, the philosopher maintained that internationalization – rather than the kind of leveling that has characterized globalization – ought to be something more akin to dialogue, with true open dialogue only being possible from a rootedness within one's own cultural traditions.*

*To my mind, even beyond the ecological imperative to turn our attention to cities, the focus on cities becomes the necessary and much needed counter-balance to the totalizing or leveling and self-righteous pitfalls of globalization – and indeed, this resistance to cultural leveling at the expense of particular local rootedness is something that I have seen expressed over and over again in Japan, which after all sits outside the globalized paradigm.*

*In Japan, for example, the Silk Road has been held up as an alternative form of globalization. Japan was on the terminus of the Silk Road and the*

nation experienced its greatest cosmopolitan flowering during the Nara period, when the Silk Road was in its heyday. In contrast to the modern ‘melting pot’ of pluralistic societies we see today, people during Silk Road times are described as having interacted with each other from standpoints of their own unique city-cultures. I think it was UNESCO’s Eiji Hattori who really gave this Japanese idea form when he created his draft for UNESCO’s Silk Road Project, <https://en.unesco.org/silkroad>, which saw a wonderful number of research projects and publications from 1988–1997. With two doctorates (one from Kyoto University and the other from the Sorbonne), Hattori has an impressive academic background. And yet, rather than entering academia, he chose instead to join UNESCO at their Paris headquarters, where he served for 21 years as a director of the cultural events section – and the Silk Roads project was his crowning glory.

Put forward as an alternative to the ‘Globalization as Americanization’ model, his project positioned the ‘Silk Road’ in opposition to something he called ‘Empire’ (or ‘pax’); so that:

<u>Pax/Empire</u>	<u>versus</u>	<u>Silk Road</u>
Monopoly		Two-Way Trade/International Relays
Monologue/Propaganda		Dialogue
National		Cities/International
Robbery		Mutual Profit/Equal Partnership/ Co-Dependence

Hattori’s main point is that during Silk Road times, dialogues between cultures were two-way. That is, it was not a power relationship dominated by one side talking/dictating/taking/imposing but rather held up a model for a more two-way dialogue based on trade; one in which trade was an international accomplishment achieved by people from many nations working for mutual benefits cooperatively; not done by one nation alone.

Hattori suggested that no one economic system or historical perspective reigned supreme above all the rest during the Tang dynasty. People interacted with each other from the framework of their own various local city-cultures. This is the famous cosmopolitanism of the Tang. When you consider that what was arguably the greatest of all empires of the time, the Tang actually built mosques and churches in their capital city to welcome the many traders who came from afar – well, it cannot help but impress. A mosque already stood in ‘Canton’ during the Prophet’s lifetime. Flourishing and highly cosmopolitan cities connected the dots along these ancient trade routes, from Nara to Chang’an to Baghdad, Aleppo, and Constantinople.

This is a theme much held up in Japan. Two years ago, I was working on a translation of an interview with one of Japan’s greatest living composers –

who now sadly is deceased. Like Yo Yo Ma, Miki Minoru is best known for his work on Silk Road music. When asked why he held up the Silk Road as a symbol of mutual cooperation and peaceful coexistence, Miki Minoru had this to say:

*The Silk Road was a uniquely peaceful trade route. Connecting Rome with Chang'an, it was a route that served to promote peaceful exchanges and mutual cooperation between Eastern and Western places. It is interesting that while in Asia the Silk Road holds great interest and dreams, in the west it seems to be mainly of interest to archaeologists. As a person who fundamentally rejects the current uninteresting state of affairs whereby as the world Westernizes we are seeing more and more of a mono-culture, what I can do in my own projects is to choose artists whose own sense of identity is not that of "international" (Liddell & Ogasawara, 2010).*

Japan, with its vibrant peace and ecology movements, has taken up these reflections of the Silk Road like perhaps no other people. Having lived the past two decades through its self-proclaimed 'Silk Road boom,' I have been so impressed by both the approach of Silk Road history scholars (like those at Ryukoku University) as well as the surprisingly long term enthusiasm of the general public for what was a time of cosmopolitan civism. Obviously, no one is really talking about how things actually may have been during the heyday of the Silk Road; for indeed, we have also seen the Silk Road used as a slogan for aggressive multinational corporations wanting to get a piece of the energy pie in that part of that world as well. But, in Japan – at least – the Silk Road has been overwhelmingly taken up as a symbol of mutual cooperation and co-flourishing which is viewed ultimately as a symbol for anti-"globalization" and world peace.

Miki Minoru in his interview said that while there will always be imbalances of power between different peoples over the stretch of time, when one group becomes overwhelmingly dominant over another a level of hate is generated that leads to violence. It was his belief that it is only through harmonious exchanges and collaborative efforts between people can genuine peace be established. But how is this possible without stepping back and looking at things on a more local level?

This is not to say that universalism is categorically problematic, but rather it is a question of balance and degree. Hannah Arendt looked at universalism as being behind many of the political pathologies of her time and felt that being derived from abstract reasoning, which stands apart from the world, universalist thinking aims to create blueprints for how we think the world 'ought' to be, and forms the basis of a political project to shape the world according to that blueprint. She instead urged people to be engaged with the world as it is – and it seems that in order to do that one must start with the local and the particular.

I am a great fan of the writing of William Dalrymple. In 2009, he had another great article in *The Guardian* about the future of travel writing. One paragraph in particular caught my attention:

*It's no accident that the mess inflicted on the world by the last US administration was done by a group of men who had hardly travelled and relied for information on policy documents and the reports of journalists sitting interviewing middle-class contacts in capital cities. A good travel writer can give you the warp and weft of everyday life, the generalities of people's existence that are rarely reflected in journalism, and hardly touched on by any other discipline. Despite the internet and the revolution in communications, there is still no substitute (Dalrymple, 2010, p. xxvi).*

Reading this I thought that nothing much has changed since the last Administration either and that US policy remains in the hands of a cabal of monoglots and cultural provincials. As Eiji Hattori (2011) said in a 2004 UNESCO speech, 'Civilizations never clash. Ignorance does clash'. Therefore we may say that true internationalism should be a kind of dialogue, whereby one is open to the world from the rootedness of one's own culture. One approaches the rich sources of other traditions from one's own worldview, but without any intention and effort to impose one's cultural presumptions. In other words, a healthy respect for the particular keeps one grounded and respectful of *other* local diversities.

This is why it is so important to give cities a voice – to recognize them as gardens which bear the flowers and fruit of their own unique cultural sensibilities and values. In Tokyo we have found that even in what is the world's largest and most complex urban metropolis, at its very roots a uniquely deep sensitivity to ephemera and transience. A history of sudden transformations and unthinkable disasters has flowered into the great social achievements of optimism and resilience that define the spirit of Tokyo.

## Notes

1. City of the Past or City of the Future? Tokyo has almost no 'past' that is still standing – neither architectural nor monumental – and this informs the idea of Tokyo as a city of 'today' or more truly, a city of 'tomorrow.' This trope first took root in the 1980s amid the city's economic boom – and from that time Tokyo has come to represent hyper-modernism in all its dimensions For a wonderful account of Gibson's return to Tokyo after the collapse of the Bubble, see Gibson (2001).
2. From an email from Jan Walls, Professor Emeritus, Humanities Department, Simon Fraser University: *I think it is really interesting that Tetsuya was literally quoting a super-common Chinese proverb (同舟共濟), for which there is no common Japanese counterpart. He is bang-on in his analysis, but isn't it ironic that there is no equivalent pearl of Japanese proverbial wisdom?*
3. 浮世: The floating world: to float (浮) signifies sadness in the face of life's many hardships and pain. From the Heian period it has been used as a metaphor for the suffering of our world. It later became associated with the Buddhist notion

of 'this transient world' (無常や仮の世) . In China, I think the term is more traditionally associated with a life of retreat from the world. Alex Kerr mentions the old Chinese novel called 「浮生六記録」 "Six Records of a Floating Life," which is a romantic true story of an impoverished scholar and his beloved wife Yun who lived in early 19th century Suzhou. Although poor they tried to live a life of elegance with nature and poetry in a little cottage. This is not unlike Tao Yuanming's ideal of plucking chrysanthemums by the eastern fence (採菊東籬下) or Lady Li's sobriquet: 'the inhabitant who is easily contented' (易安居士). In Edo, though, this notion was turned on its head. Rather than seeing it in the pessimistic light of Buddhist philosophy, transience was held up as liberating: 'If this moment is all we have, we had better live and love with gusto!' And, so in Edo, the floating world took on the meaning of love affairs and play→遊 For me, this will always be the 'spirit of Tokyo.'

4. Eric Selland, private email.
5. An email from Daniel Bell and my mutual friend East Asian religious studies scholar Jeffrey Richey: This brings to mind one of Donald Richie's bon mots: *I think the only Japanese religion is being Japanese.* My sense is that Richie is right, insofar as both imported and indigenous traditions have become so thoroughly integrated both with one another and with Japanese cultural/ethnic/national identity that they all have become different facets of one unified Japanese religion of 'Japaneseness' When various individuals and communities within Japan contest this by asserting a religious identity independent of Japaneseness (Japanese Christians, Muslims, Soka Gakkai, etc.), they serve as exceptions that prove the rule, in my opinion. And yet the 'religion of Japaneseness' is intrinsically both local and global – local because it is asserted by and for Japanese alone, and global because its constituent elements (even Shintō, tea ceremony, and other 'quintessentially Japanese' traditions) come from outside of Japan, at least originally. This in turn brings to mind Alex Kerr's famous (infamous?) oyster metaphor for Japan: 'Japan is like an oyster. An oyster dislikes foreign objects: when even the smallest grain of sand or broken shell finds its way inside the oyster shell, the oyster finds the invasion intolerable, so it secretes layer after layer of nacre upon the surface of the offending particle, eventually creating a beautiful pearl.. In like manner, Japan coats all culture from abroad, transforming it into a Japanese-style pearl.' (Kerr, 1996, p. 231).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interests was reported to the author.

## Notes on contributor

**Leanne Ogasawara** has worked as a translator from the Japanese for over twenty years. Her translation work has included academic translation, poetry, philosophy, and documentary film. Her creative writing has appeared in Hedgehog Review, Kyoto Journal, River Teeth/Beautiful Things, the Dublin Review of Books, Pleiades Magazine, and the Pasadena Star newspaper. She also has a monthly column at the science and arts blog 3 Quarks Daily. In 2020, she was awarded the Calvino Prize in creative writing.

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