KYOTO PILGRIMAGE PAST AND PRESENT

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Introduction

Kyoto, or Heian-kyō as it was known for most of its history, is perhaps unlike other pilgrimage cities in the world. It has no one distinguishing landscape feature such as the Ganges in Benares which perennially draws pilgrims to its shores. It does have the Kamo, Katsura, and Uji rivers, but these waters have primarily attracted not pilgrims but rather poets, moon viewing parties and even double love-suicides to its banks and bridges well into the modern period. Kyoto does not possess any single sacred site such as the sanctuary in Santiago de Compostela to which penitents progress on bended, bloodied knee. Rather, it boasts thousands of Buddhist temples, Shintō shrines, Daoist-inspired gardens and sacred mountain climbs that are designed to elevate the spirit and cultivate the connection between nature, human nature and Buddha-nature. It has numerous pilgrimage destinations within the contours of its urban landscape, but at the same time also participates in far-reaching pilgrimage circuits that extend well beyond the metropolitan center. All roads may lead to Rome as the old adage goes, but in Kyoto’s case, roads run both ways, leading pilgrims as much out beyond the urban setting as drawing them in toward the city center. This essay, accordingly, will address pilgrimage itineraries in and around Kyoto from the perspective of a much larger matrix of pilgrimage activity in the Kansai region. In the process, it will revisit the false dichotomy between pilgrimage and tourism (a theme that Chaucer first brought to light over six-hundred years ago), and hopefully shed new
light on some contemporary pilgrimage practices in Japan by a whole host of players: tourists, school groups, tea aficionados, Reiki practitioners, scholars, and nature-lovers alike.

**Mountain pilgrimages around the city**

Taking our cue from Victor Hugo’s famous bird’s-eye view of Paris, let us broadly survey the topography and chronology of Kyoto à vol d’oiseau.¹ Heian-kyō (lit. the capital of peace and tranquility) was established in 794 by Emperor Kammu to escape the political intrigues of the Buddhist clergy in the old capital of Nara.² After a disastrous decade at the short-lived capital at Nagaoka (784-794 CE), Heian-kyō was sited in the flat plain of the Yamashiro basin according to Chinese principles of feng shui geomancy. Mountains (symbolizing the male yang aspect) surround the capital on three sides to the north, and its rivers (symbolizing the female yin aspect) flow south. Buddhist Mt. Hiei to the northeast and proto-Shinto Mt. Kurama to the northwest protected the capital from evil influences that were believed to emanate from the north. Like most sacred mountains, these peaks were closed to women before the so-called nyonin kekkai ban was lifted in the nineteenth century, but today both male and female pilgrims are able to make their way up the slopes by bus, funicular, or (rarely) by foot. Many Tendai Buddhist congregations and confraternities organize package tours to their head temple at Enryakuji on Mt. Hiei to pay homage to their founder Saichō (767-822) and the great Tendai reformers of the medieval period.³ Perhaps the most impressive practice associated with the mountain is the Kaihogyō or 1,000-day austerity-training performed by Tendai “marathon monks.”⁴ They circumambulate the mountain’s temple complex in sets of 100 or 200 days per year, incessantly chanting the mantra of Fudō myōō, the King of Immovable Wisdom. They run approximately thirty kilometers per day in straw sandals, stopping only to sleep, eat, or pause at approximately 260 worship stops. They culminate their pilgrimage in their seventh year by including the entire city of Kyoto in their circumambulation.

On the other side of the city to the northwest, other less organized and less intense pilgrims hike Mt. Kurama to retrace the steps of Mikao Usui (1865-1926). This modern-day seeker reputedly discovered the hands-on healing technique of Reiki in either 1914 or 1922 (the accounts differ) while in retreat on the mountain.⁵ Other visitors attend the
annual Kurama fire festival here which commemorates the transfer and enshrinement of a *kami* spirit from the Imperial Palace to rural Kurama village during the Heian period (794-1192). Besides this emblem of Kyoto’s city-country continuum, other mountains around the Yamashiro basin draw pilgrims to their peaks. Nishiyama to the east gathers esoteric Shugendo ascetics who regularly perform *goma* fire ceremonies and fire walking rituals on the mountain. Arashiyama to the west is especially popular among literary pilgrims and nature-lovers who wish to view the bamboo groves and scarlet maples celebrated by haiku poet Bashō (1644-1694). The entire mountain at Fushimi Inari Jinja to the southeast is considered to be a sacred Shintō *kami* with thousands of crimson *torii* gates framing its myriad mountain paths. As Allan Grapard observes, “cultic centers” and “numinous sites” (*reijō*) such as these became pilgrimage destinations during the medieval period and were “…conceived and ritually treated on the basis of fundamental conceptions and formulations of space, of ritual and social organization and of time.”

**Pilgrimage destinations within the city**

In the valley itself, the cityscape is far more ordered than the rugged terrain surrounding it. Kyoto’s grid pattern of city wards was originally modeled on China’s cosmopolitan capital of Chang’an (present-day Xi’an). This form of city planning is commonly known as the “well-field system,” named after the tick-tack-toe and cross-boxed shapes of the Chinese characters for water-wells (戶) and rice fields (田). During the Heian period, the axial Suzoku (Red Phoenix) Road divided the capital in half, with Saiji (West Temple) and Tōji (East Temple) on either side of the main avenue. Saiji was destroyed by fire in the thirteenth century, but Tōji became a major center for pilgrims and adepts of the great esoteric Buddhist master Kūkai (774-835). Historically, Tōji often functioned as a start and end point for pilgrimages to the eighty-eight temple circuit dedicated to Kūkai on nearby Shikoku island. Today, Tōji attracts visitors of many stripes: school groups of uniformed teenagers and their faculty chaperones, scholar-pilgrims observing the annual one-day opening of the imposing five-tiered pagoda and Latter Seven-Day Rite Hall in January, and kimono-seeking bargain-hunting pilgrims who flock to the temple flea market on the 21st of every month.
After the Heian period, Kyoto itself underwent numerous changes over the centuries. The devastating Ōnin civil war (1467-1477) for example, destroyed so much of the city that St. Francis Xavier observed the city was still in ruins when he visited in 1549. Regent Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537-1598) dramatically reconfigured the city in 1583 when he rebuilt numerous religious establishments in the consolidated Teramachi (temple town) section of Kyoto. Today Teramachi is a popular tourist destination area primarily for its commercial concentration of arcaded souvenir shops, but its temples and much of Toyotomi’s city plan can still be seen in place today. Allied bombing spared much of Kyoto during World War II thanks to the petitions of Henry L. Stimson, Secretary of War during Franklin D. Roosevelt’s and Truman’s administrations.

Toyotomi was a great student of the tea ceremony, though he eventually ordered his tea master and advisor Sen no Rikyū (1522-1591) to commit seppuku (ritual suicide). Tea aficionados from all over the world gather in Kyoto for Sen’s memorial services on March 28 every year, while those visiting Kyoto at other times of the year simply make a mini-pilgrimage to pay their respects at his gravesite at Jukoin, a subtemple of Daitokuji’s Zen temple complex. Memorial services also draw pilgrims to Higashi Honganji temple every year on November 28th to celebrate the death anniversary of Shinran (1173-1263), the founder of the True Pure Land sect of Buddhism in Japan. They attend memorial services in the huge hondō (main hall) of the temple and observe the annual display of Shin lineage scrolls and patriarch portraits.

Regional pilgrimage itineraries
In addition to launching pilgrimages to the eighty-eight temples in Shikoku, other pilgrimage circuits (junrei) pass through Kyoto. One particularly popular route is dedicated to Kannon, the bodhisattva of compassion, who is said to manifest in thirty-three different forms to help alleviate the cries of suffering in the world. The route was supposedly established in 718 when the lord of the underworld Emma-O instructed the monk Tokudō Shōnin (dates unknown) of Kannon’s mercies. Ever since 988 when Emperor Kazan (968-1008) embarked upon the thirty-three temple pilgrimage, the so-called Saikoku (western Japan) Kannon pilgrimage has attracted courtiers and commoners, clergy and
laity, old and young, men and women throughout history.\(^9\) It even inspired replica routes in the environs of Edo (present-day Tokyo) and a condensed thirty-three Kannon temple circuit within Kyoto itself. Evidence of the pilgrims’ journeys can still be found in the form of old nameslips (seniya fuda) that can be seen glued on temple gates before it became illegal to “deface historic monuments” in the modern period. Today pilgrims continue the tradition of collecting temple stamps (shuin) in special accordion-style booklets (nokyocho) as proof of their visit to each temple and the karmic merit that it generates.

Although less popular than the Kannon junrei, pilgrimage circuits dedicated to other Buddhist deities also pass through Kyoto. These circuits include temples dedicated to Fudō myōō (the Immovable Wisdom King) and Jizo bosatsu (a psychopomp bodhisattva who escorts the departed—especially young children and either aborted or miscarried fetuses—to be reborn in Amida Buddha’s Pure Land). The forty-nine temple pilgrimage route dedicated to the Medicine Buddha Yakushi nyorai was understandably yet counterproductively well-traveled especially during periods of pestilence and epidemic. As the temples themselves often served as hospitals, they primarily attracted pilgrims afflicted with disease or those exposed to a dying or deceased family member. As a result, a pilgrimage to the Buddha of healing paradoxically spread epidemics even further throughout the Kansai region, and may have contributed to pilgrims’ questionable reputation throughout Japanese history. Pilgrims in Japan were not always universally embraced as genuine spiritual seekers but rather as unsavory drifters who more often than not masked their poverty, illness, crimes, homelessness and desperation with the pilgrim’s garb in an attempt to make a virtue out of necessity. As Ian Reader suggests, the pilgrim occupies a liminal space in Japanese society, and concurs with Dubisch that “... pilgrimage, rather than being a process in which pilgrims step outside their normal social milieu and become liminal, in effect draws to it those who are already liminal and on the margins of society.”\(^{10}\) This marginality is marked by the pilgrim’s white robes, which automatically evoke the white shrouds for the deceased in Japan.

As opposed to these multi-temple pilgrimage circuits, Kyoto also served as the start and finish point for single destination pilgrimages (sankei). In the classic Heian period, the court would travel to Ise to visit
the shrine to the Sun Goddess and imperial progenitrix Amaterasu. Many women also journeyed to Kumano to visit the supposed earthly location of Kannon’s Pure Land of Potala (the namesake of the Dalai Lama’s famed palace in Lhasa, Tibet) as Kumano was one of the few sacred mountains open to women. The typical pilgrimage season to such destinations was during the spring and fall months, but pilgrims to Mt. Fuji and other sacred peaks (e.g., Mt. Ontake, Dewa Sanzan, Tateyama, etc.) were compelled to wait until the summer melt. Such considerations bring us to a discussion of pilgrimage by the seasons.

**Seasonal pilgrimage itineraries**

Today as in former times, pilgrimage activity in Kyoto is defined by the seasons. On New Year’s Day after the temple bells have been struck 108 times to dispel the 108 delusions in the human mind, the Japan Travel Bureau (JTB) organizes package tours for pilgrims intent on ameliorating their good luck for the new year. They visit seven Kyoto temples with statues to the Seven Gods of Good Fortune (*shichi fukujin*), an amalgam of originally Indian, Chinese, and Japanese deities that first became popular as a set during the Edo period (1600-1868). According to neo-Daoist numerology, in 2009 women aged 33 and men aged 42 are particularly susceptible to having a year of bad luck (*yakudoshi*), with a year of lesser bad luck before and after the main one. Such individuals make up the majority of JTB’s clientele for the annual Shichifukujin Pilgrimage, and the revenue generated from their purchase of protective amulets (*omamori*) at these and other locales help to support the shrines and temples.

Spring in Kyoto is heralded by the blossoming cherry trees in Maruyama park, Heian jingu shrine and the banks of the Kamogawa river by Sanjō bridge. For some—especially the many photographers of Kyoto—the annual rite of cherry blossom viewing (*ohanami*) constitutes a pilgrimage of sorts; for the more prosaic it is a raucous excuse to get drunk with friends, colleagues and work associates. Others take the event more seriously and venture to nearby Yoshino (about an hour southeast of Kyoto by train), whose waterfalls and cedars were extolled in the eighth century Manyōshū poetry collection:

Gracefully told
Is the name of Yoshino;
Like rolling thunder,
I hear its name resounding;
Here I am standing,
Looking over the whole land
From the mountain top
Covered with cedars,
And the morning is breaking,
Fog is rising by the stream,
And when evening comes,
Here and there frogs are trilling;
But I, a traveler,
Unable to untie my laces,
Standing all alone
By the stream and on the sands,
Gaze on and on unwearied.12

The summer months in Kyoto are unbearably hot and humid as the mountains surrounding the city trap the hot air and cook the plain below as in a convection oven. Not much pilgrimage activity occurs within Kyoto itself during the summer months, although plenty of locals and tourists flock to see the colorful yamaboko floats of the Gion matsuri festival in July and the glowing figures of Kyoto’s mountainside bonfires lit to guide spirits home during Obon in August. Pilgrims will use the national holiday of Golden Week in May, school vacations in late June and July or the week of Obon in August to temple-hop outside the city or to take up a pilgrimage circuit where they left off a previous year. Even given the rigors of a Shikoku pilgrimage, for example, the mountain breezes are a welcome respite from Kyoto proper.

The autumn months in Kyoto are arguably the most rewarding for certain kinds of pilgrims. For the scholar-pilgrim interested in the history and artistic achievements of pre-modern Japan, September and October offer the airing of temple treasures at Nanzenji, Daitokuji and other famous Zen temples in Kyoto. For aficionados of Japanese garden design, Marc Keene’s annual garden tour of Kyoto temples and shrines draws students from the world over who make the pilgrimage to view the gardens at their peak. For Japanese nature-lovers and hiker-pilgrims, the spectacular fall foliage (kōyō) in Kyoto’s westernmost Arashiyama
district constitutes a destination pilgrimage (sankei) in and of itself. This is not surprising given Japan’s long-standing history of mountain worship and Shugendō mountaineering Buddhism. Hikers in Japan claim their activity can be as spiritually uplifting and transformative as visiting any temple—if not more so. They take their enterprise as seriously as any pilgrim, substituting white pilgrims’ garb for professional hiking gear and pilgrims’ confraternities for organized hiking clubs. The evening news on Japanese TV even broadcasts a Kōyō Watch that traces the front of peak fall foliage moving down over the archipelago, just as the Sakura Watch every spring traces the front of peak cherry blossoms moving upwards over the islands. In Japan as elsewhere, some pilgrimages can only be undertaken when the time is right.

**Conclusion—pilgrimage as tourism?**

In writing this piece on pilgrimage I have occasionally slipped into tourist mode, dabbled in urban planning history, sampled classic poetry, revisited mountain lore and dipped into personal memories and anecdotes. This is not surprising, as the category of pilgrimage itself is a polymorphous one; inviting a multitude of voices and views as Chaucer first chronicled on the road to Canterbury.

Of course Kyoto still possesses the must-see Big Three for any tourist-pilgrim to the city: (1) Kinkakuji Golden temple, (2) Kiyomizudera Pure Water Temple, and (3) Ryoanji Zen rock garden temple. Sometimes the Kyoto tourist will substitute or add in Sanjusangendo thirty-three Bay Hall in order to see the 1,001 golden Kannon statues by the famous Kei atelier of sculptors, but some will merely go across the street from the Kyoto train station to Kyoto Tower for a time-saving one-stop virtual pilgrimage experience of Kyoto. After walking through a miniaturized map of the city and its environs for a few hundred yen, one can rest alongside a life-sized mannequin dressed in white pilgrim garb and woven reed hat. In this commercialized context, the historic liminality of the pilgrim’s status is erased and replaced by an overly romanticized and wholly Orientalist kitsch of hyper-realistic proportions. So much for pilgrims’ progress.

**Notes**

1. Paris à Vol d’Oiseau [lit. the flight (vol) of the bird (oiseau), or “as the bird flies”] is the title of book three in Victor Hugo’s *Notre Dame de Paris.*
2. Empress Kōken (r. 749-758) who renamed herself Empress Shōtoku during her second reign (r. 764-770) reportedly fell for the seductions, manipulations and imperial aspirations of the ambitious monk Dōkyō (d. 772). Under pressure from a rival faction at court, an oracle reversed an initial divine ordinance in 769 that Dōkyō should become emperor (Digital Database of Buddhism, ed. Charles Muller, http://www.buddhism-dict.net/ddb/, accessed November 29, 2008).

3. E.g., Sōtō Zen Master Dōgen (1200-1243), Rinzai Zen Master Eisai (1141-1215), Pure Land Patriarch Hōnen (1133-1212), True Pure Land Founder Shinran (1173-1263), and the charismatic Nichiren (1222-1282) all began their careers training at Enryakuji temple, the Tendai headquarters on Mt. Hiei.


5. Many English-language Reiki websites mistakenly call the mountain Kuriyama, which may account for some misguided pilgrimages to Kuriyama, Iwate prefecture (about five hours north of Tokyo). These same sources also claim Usui discovered Reiki in the mid-nineteenth century (despite his birthdate in 1865).

6. Shugendō: a particularly rigorous form of religious asceticism in Japan that combines elements of indigenous mountain worship, esoteric Buddhism, Daoist austerities and other techniques for self-cultivation.


8. This being said, Kōyaan monastery in Wakayama prefecture to the southeast of Kyoto is the traditional start and end point for the Shikoku pilgrimage.


13. Kiyomizudera is part of Kannon’s thirty-three temple circuit that also counts as five temples in the condensed rakuyo version within Kyoto.
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