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Urban Sociology of Kyoto, Japan

Kyoto is one of Japan's oldest and most well-known cities. It's located in the Kansai region and has a population of 1.4 million people. For more than a thousand years, it was Japan's capital city before Tokyo took its place. In fact, the word Kyōto translates to capital city (Cary and Otis). Today, Kyoto mixes the old and the new as ancient temples and wooden houses stand beside modern buildings and shops. I chose Kyoto because it was the setting of a book I read called "The Kamogawa Food Detectives" by Hisashi Kashiwai. When I watched a video tour of the city, I was amazed by how beautiful the streets of Gion were at night with lanterns glowing (The KYOTO). Viewing the videos makes it easy to believe that a small magical restaurant could be tucked away in a corner of the city. I was also drawn to the geishas walking through the streets of the Gion district, which made me want to learn more about how Kyoto keeps its culture alive while still being a modern city.

Kyoto's material culture is deeply shaped by its many traditional crafts. There are more than 70 traditional industries that still thrive in the city. One especially striking example involves the Uenaka brothers, who inherited centuries-old artisan skills. "The eldest son, Teruhiro, decorates kimonos with gold leaf. The patterns he creates by applying thin gold foil to kimonos makes them look even more gorgeous. Teruhiro's

gilding is not limited to kimonos, he also applies it to ceramic plates and denim fabrics. Everyday items such as denim wallets can be enhanced with his stylish designs made of shining gold leaf” (“Kyoto, a City of Beauty and Culture with Over 70 Traditional Industries”).

Kyoto’s material culture is easily seen in its buildings, art, and historic places. The city has thousands of temples and shrines, like the Golden Pavilion (*Kinkaku-ji*) and the famous Fushimi Inari Shrine with its red gates. Many older houses, called *machiya*, are made of wood and have been standing for hundreds of years (“Kyoto | Kansai | Destinations | Travel Japan - Japan National Tourism Organization (Official Site)”). Kyoto also has tea houses, gardens, and markets that show the city’s traditional craftsmanship and love for beauty. “The historic influence of Kyoto’s architecture is incredibly rich, captivating and sacred. Known as the heart of Japan, Kyoto tries to preserve ancient buildings that date back thousands of years. The ancient capital features beautiful temples, stunning shrines, magnificent palaces and traditional gardens. These structures reflect traditional Japanese style and heritage” (Winters).

The nonmaterial culture of Kyoto is about the values, beliefs, and traditions that people still follow. Respect, mindfulness, and community are very important. The tea ceremony, for example, isn’t just about drinking tea. It’s about patience and appreciation for small moments. “The tea ceremony —or, directly translated, the “way of tea”—is in many ways a microcosm of the Japanese traditional sense of *omotenashi*, which translates as to look after guests wholeheartedly. The tea ceremony is known as *chanoyu*, or *sado*, in Japanese, and the art and performance of preparing and

presenting matcha powdered green tea is called otemae. Chakai are informal gatherings held to appreciate the ritualized serving of tea, while the more formal occasion is a chaji. An alternative, but less common, version of the ceremony uses tea leaves and is known as senchado” (Japan National Tourism Organization).

Festivals like Hanami (cherry blossom viewing) and Gion Matsuri bring people together and show how much the city values its history and seasons. Social life in Kyoto mixes tradition with everyday activities. The Gion Matsuri festival every July is one of the biggest and oldest in Japan. It has parades, traditional clothing, and community events that keep people connected to their past. “Originally held to pray for deliverance from plague, the festival has evolved into a huge celebration of Kyoto culture” (Gion Matsuri: Kyoto’s Biggest Festival).

Another popular festival called Toko Ebisu is held in January. “Ebisu is one of the Shichifukujin, the Seven Lucky Gods of Japanese folklore, who are traditionally associated with the New Year. He is, however, the only one of these gods whose story is homegrown Japanese. The other six gods all originate from China and India” (*Toka Ebisu*, n.d.). Visitors go to his shrine, and many purchase bamboo and charms, which they attach to the bamboo. “Throughout the festival, shrine maidens perform a ritual dance called kagura. This simple dance to pipe and drum has its roots in ancient shamanic rites held to summon the gods. At Ebisu Festival it is performed to purify and bless the lucky branches of bamboo grass” (*Toka Ebisu*, n.d.). Since Ebisu is hard of hearing, people knock on the wood located to the side of his altar for him to wake up and hear their prayers.

Food is also a big part of social life. “Kyoto, as the capital of Japan for over a thousand years, was the kitchen of the Imperial Court. Top-ranking nobles inherited a multitude of refined cuisines, including specialties unique to Kyoto such as elegant Kyo-kaiseki-ryori, vegetarian-friendly Shojin-ryori, and Obanzai for everyday dining. Today, Kyoto remains the home of traditional Japanese cuisine, and there are many specialty eateries for sushi, tempura, soba, and ramen. It was the efforts of Kyoto chefs that resulted in Washoku, or Japanese cuisine, being recognized as an intangible heritage by UNESCO in 2013” (Kyoto Travel). Some of the restaurants bring aspects of food from past centuries, but many experiment with new flavors or bring recipes from other parts of the world (Kyoto Food Guide).

“Kyoto is the heart of Japan’s geisha world. In Kyoto, however, fully-fledged geisha are properly called geiko (pronounced “gay-ko”). Young ladies, usually between the ages of 15 and 20, train for five years to become a geiko. During this period, they are known as maiko (pronounced “my-ko”)” (*Kyoto Geisha*, n.d.). One way to observe a geisha is by attending one of Kyoto’s five-yearly geisha dances, which are generally held in the spring and fall.

“Gion (祇園) is Kyoto's most famous geisha district, located around Shijo Avenue between Yasaka Shrine in the east and the Kamo River in the west. It is filled with shops, restaurants and ochaya (teahouses), where geiko (Kyoto dialect for geisha) and maiko (geiko apprentices) entertain. Gion attracts tourists with its high concentration of traditional wooden machiya merchant houses. Since property taxes were formerly based upon street frontage, the houses were built with narrow

facades only five to six meters wide, but extend up to twenty meters in from the street” (Gion).

The district also faces problems. Because it’s such a popular tourist spot, many locals say it’s getting too crowded and losing some of its quiet charm. Some old houses have been turned into hotels or stores, which makes it harder for regular people to live there.

Another major problem in all of Kyoto is overtourism, too many visitors in a small area. Millions of tourists come each year to see famous temples and streets, and it can make life hard for locals. “The number of international and domestic tourists that visited Kyoto in 2023 alone was 32 million—and it continues to grow, according to news reports. The surge in foreign tourists is due to many factors, including the weak yen, Kyoto’s world-famous landmarks, and popular travel destinations. However, Kyoto’s size and layout are not built to withstand the massive amounts of people” (Tourism pollution’ mars popular Kyoto). In Gion, for example, people sometimes follow or photograph geisha without permission. Because of this, some private streets have banned tourists, and there are even fines for breaking the rules. “In early 2024, Kyoto officials announced a ban on entering Gion’s private streets and taking photos in the area. There are now signs and fines of up to 10,000 yen (about \$63 USD) for anyone that does not comply with the new regulation” (Tourism pollution’ mars popular Kyoto).

Kyoto is an amazing example of how a city can stay connected to its past while still changing with the times. Its temples, gardens, and festivals show the best of Japanese culture, but the problems it faces, like overtourism, show how hard it can be

to balance tradition and modern life. Kyoto's story is important because many cities around the world are dealing with the same issue: how to stay true to their identity while adapting to a global, modern world.

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