

Kyoto as a Palimpsest for Textual Heritage Or How to Rewrite a Historic Urban Space

Edoardo Gerlini^{1*}

¹ Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Department of Asian and Mediterranean African and
North African Studies, Venice, Italy

*Corresponding author. Email: edoardo.gerlini@unive.it

ABSTRACT

Recently, Kyoto has become one of the most popular touristic destination in Asia, attracting each year a growing number of visitors. This development has a double-faced consequence: greater efforts for the preservation of major historical sites, and at the same time a faster demolition of typical cityscapes and traditional neighborhoods not strictly tied to touristic routes. The aim seems to revert large portions of the urban space into more profitable and market-oriented facilities: hotels, parking lots, luxury apartments.

Drawing both on previous theories from the critical heritage studies field, especially those that re-evaluate the necessity of forgetting and destroying as an unavoidable part of the heritagization process itself, and both on the original idea of “textual heritage” proposed by the author, this paper aims to reflect on practices of valorization, demolition and “rewriting” of both the urban spaces of Kyoto, from an interdisciplinary point of view that sees the city as a textual palimpsest embodying past memories and cultural practices.

Is it possible to compare processes of collation and reconstruction of premodern texts and manuscripts – for example a modern critical edition of *The Tale of Genji* – with the recover of historic vernacular architectures in a city like Kyoto? How the expertise of philologists in seeking and reconstructing the textual archetype may inform the way citizenship of historical cities is felt, negotiated, and reconstructed in the present? Can the concept of Classics contribute to imagining new ways to preserve historical cities in the 21th century?

Keywords: Kyoto, Textual heritage, Machiya, Classical literature, Palimpsest, Embodiment.

1. HISTORIC URBAN LANDSCAPE IN DANGER

Historical cities, intended as urban landscapes composed not only by monumental building, but also by streets and neighborhood of vernacular architectures, have been notoriously an of important object of preservation in the heritage politics and discourse since the establishment of the World Heritage Convention by UNESCO in 1972. Historical centers of cities like Krakow, Cairo, and Rome, were all inscribed in the first three rounds of nominations between 1978 and 1980, with many others being inscribed in the following years: Florence, Venice, Havana, Cuzco, Berne and so on. The last historic center being inscribed on the list is the “Historic Centre of Sheki with the Khan’s Palace (Azerbaijan)” in 2019.

In 1992, the introduction of the category of “cultural landscape” to the World Heritage sites extended the range of this particular evaluation of historical environments outside the urban context. Cultural landscape had the declared scope to “allow the international recognition of new forms of non-monumental cultural heritage of different cultures” (UNESCO 1994, 3), even if its effectiveness in counterbalancing the long-standing euro-centrism that characterizes the World Heritage List has been questioned (Brumann and Gfeller 2022).

Noticeably, non-European countries usually struggled for inscribing their cities into the list, and also when this is the case, like in “Old Havana and its Fortification System”, what is intended as heritage are often the remains of the European colonial past: a sort of European heritage at the second degree.

The case of Japan I will discuss in this paper is particularly meaningful. At present, Japan has no entries such as “historic city of” or “historic center of”, and only two entries in the category of cultural landscapes: “Sacred Sites and Pilgrimage Routes in the Kii Mountain Range”, and “Iwami Ginzan Silver Mine and its Cultural Landscape”. Actually, even if the oldest cities in Japan like Nara or Kyoto do have a considerable number of sites inscribed in the World Heritage List – often grouped in sets of dozens of buildings and monuments – and these include some streets and alleys of the so-called buffer zone around the main monuments, none of them corresponds exactly to what is traditionally intended as a “historic centre” of a still inhabited city. “Historic Villages of Shirakawa-go and Gokayama” seems to be the only exception, but again, these very small mountain villages are basically distant from the idea of a “historic center” located into an urban context.

In Japan the case of Kyoto – the old capital from 794 to 1868 – is particularly exemplary. Despite being spared by bombing and major damage during WWII, many portions of the urban space of Kyoto underwent a heavy process of re-development from the 70’s onward. Symbol of this destructive re-development is the progressive disappearing of the traditional city-house called *machiya* or *kyōmachiya* (literally, city-house of the capital), that until the 60’s was the most common type of residential architecture in the central part of the city. Traditional neighborhoods distant from the main touristic spots and routes have been generally reverted into more profitable and market-oriented facilities: hotels, parking lots, apartments. This trend continues even now, with some hundreds of *machiya* being demolished every year. It is true that in the last three decades we assisted, on the other side, to a tourism-driven “*machiya* boom”, with more and more *machiya* being restored and converted into fashionable shops, cafes, offices or guest houses (Brumann 2010), but these surviving examples of traditional building are scattered around a city composed mostly by new, modern-style buildings.

In short, a part few circumscribed touristic spots and streets, great part of the traditional neighborhoods of Kyoto and its typical skyline are disappearing year by year.

Therefore today, a nomination of the historic center of Kyoto as a whole is much unluckily, if not even impossible, also because it is even difficult to identify which part of the city should be really considered the “historic center”. Actually, the case of Japan is interesting not only because it is one of the most generous non-Western contributors to the UNESCO programs that invests a considerable amount of resources in heritage conservation and management, but also because Japan has been the protagonist of a groundbreaking rethinking of the concept of heritage during the 90’s, with the Nara Documents on Authenticity.

Issued in 1995 by the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), under the political support of Japan, the Documents redefined in particular the concept of what should be considered authentic heritage and how to manage it. This gave to countries characterized by a different relationship with material culture – in short, wooden architecture rather than stone and mortar – like Japan the theoretical backbone to inscribe into the UNESCO World Heritage List even some historical buildings that have been partially or completely rebuilt during the 20th century. In Japan the most

famous examples are the golden pavilion Kinkakuji – rebuilt in the 50’s – and the Shuri castle in Okinawa, burnt during WWII and again in 2019.

The Advisory Body Evaluation by ICOMOS issued in 1994 for the nomination of “Historic Monuments of Ancient Kyoto” is somehow anticipating the principal ideas behind the Nara Documents.

“Although in only very rare cases have entire buildings, or even portions of them, survived intact from their construction, the rigorous respect for the original form, decoration, and materials that has prevailed in Japan for a millennium and more has ensured that what is visible today conforms in almost every detail with the original structures” (ICOMOS 1994, 43)

The Nara Documents and further declarations about the protection of cultural diversity succeeded in relativizing Western-centric concepts heritage as solely monumental, as well as the rules for preserving an historical urban space. Even so, it seems that this new concept of authenticity arrived too late, or has been ineffective to stop or revert the process of demolition of Kyoto’s traditional neighborhoods.

It is reasonable to acknowledge to the citizens of Kyoto the right to change and improve their living environment according to their will and modern standard of living, included the conversion of old wooden structure with earthquake-proof concrete buildings. At the same time, it is undeniable that the “traditional” appearance of buildings, streets and neighborhoods in Kyoto has been in great part definitively lost.

Even considering destruction and forgetting as an integral part of the heritage process (Harrison) it is hard to claim that the Japanese way of urban re-development and the demolition of *machiya* represent just a genuinely Japanese style of “preservation”. Moreover, the replacement of *machiya* with concrete buildings is in no way consistent with the idea of authenticity promoted by the Nara Documents.

It seems almost undeniable that in Kyoto, instances for the protection of the cultural landscape and needs for economic and technological growth seem to remain dramatically on opposite, clashing sides.

With this paper I want to propose a different view on the future of the historical landscape of Kyoto, reflecting on the possibilities of reverting it into a more traditional look while at the same time doesn’t stop the process of redevelopment. Drawing on the recent understanding of heritage as a cultural and social practice performed to make sense of the past in present societies, I suggest a rethinking of Kyoto as a physical embodiment of intangible practices, and at the same time as a textual palimpsest that keeps trace of past processes of development, meaning making, and memories. I also draw on the original category of “textual heritage” I elaborated recently to stimulate a deeper insight into the meaning of historical cities and their preservation in the 21st century.

2. KYOTO’S URBAN MEMORIES

A thing that usually shocks foreign visitors who set foot on the futuristic Kyoto station (completed in 1997) is the contrast between the modern appearance of the real Kyoto with the image and narration that wants Kyoto and Kyoto’s citizens as the uppermost example and heirs of the “authentic” Japanese traditions. The modern boulevard sided by concrete buildings doesn’t match that idea. On the other side it is true that many schools of traditional arts, from ikebana to kintsugi, from tea ceremony to poetry, have their place in Kyoto. These sets of traditional knowledges, arts and practices, sometimes transmitted in the same family for generations, are part of what we are used to call intangible cultural heritage. At a superficial look, one may conclude that cultural preservation in Kyoto, while it emphasizes the intangible side of heritage, at the same time pays few or no attention to the tangible, material side, at least for what concerns the look of the urban, public space. But actually,

despite its dramatic destruction and redevelopment, the urban space of Kyoto is indeed soaked with history. Almost every corner of Kyoto is scattered with signs and plates indicating the places of famous episodes, or where a particular building now lost was located. The name of streets and neighborhood carry on and foster into citizens and visitors the memory of the past Kyoto, the Miyako (capital) that worked as cultural and political center of Japan for many centuries.

Just a couple of examples: the place of the assassination of one of the key figures of Meiji reform, Sakamoto Ryoma (1835-1867) in central Kyoto, Shioyachō, is indicated by a stele in front of a shop; along the Kamo river, close to the bridge of Gojō, is placed a sculpture showing two men fighting, to indicate the place where, according to the legend, the warrior-monk Benkei was defeated by the young Minamoto no Yoshitsune, brother of the first shogun of Japan, Yoritomo.

Particularly interesting is how some of these places are tied to legends and literary characters rather than to historical facts. It is the case of the places tied to the *Tale of Genji* (*Genji monogatari*), the most important masterpiece of Japanese classical literature, written by the court lady Murasaki at the beginning of the 12th century. Great part of the tale was set in ancient Kyoto, and places corresponding to where the protagonist of the story, Hikaru Genji, lived and operated, are indicated by plates and signs. Maps that overlay modern Kyoto to the old one, Heiankyō, like the *Kyoto Genji monogatari chizu*, and touristic tours titled “walking with Genji” are quite popular especially between Japanese tourists.

In her book, Roberta Strippoli shows how, in Japan, literary sources and works of fiction gave birth to a series of monuments, like tombs or commemorative steles, that function as a kind of cultural heritage (Strippoli 2018). This phenomenon of heritagization of literary works is not unique to Japan, as the popularity of the “house of Juliet” – a modern invention for the fictional character created by Shakespeare – in Verona demonstrates.

3. TEXTUAL HERITAGE AND THE URBAN PALIMPSEST

I will now introduce the concept of “textual heritage”, with which I tried to question the concept of heritage from the point of view of written textual sources and their production (Gerlini and Kōno 2021). Drawing on recent developments of the concept of heritage proposed by the new interdisciplinary approach known as critical heritage studies – heritage is not as a thing, but a social and cultural practice of valorization and meaning-making (Smith 2006) – I tried to define “textual heritage” as follows:

Textual heritage indicates both the texts of the past (intended as the contents AND the physical medium on which they are inscribed), and both the various cultural practices of use and re-creation of those texts: reading, writing, copying, collecting, translating, noting, teaching, correcting, performing, collating, restoring and so on. Textual heritage therefore regards the transmission of the physical medium and the immaterial information inscribed on it, as well as the transmission of the knowledge needed to use and reproduce it – the literacy. This has as a result the creation of new social values, meanings and interpretations of the text.

The creation of monuments like the Benkei-Yoshitsune statue, or the displacement of signs in the “places of Genji monogatari”, may be intended as a cultural practice aimed to tie a place with a specific and shared memory of the past. This stimulates processes of negotiation of the shared cultural identity – both local and national, since Kyoto is charged with a great symbolic capital acknowledged by great part of the Japanese –reinforce the relationship with an imagined past. In this sense, to create a statue or to place a sign may be intended as a form of heritagization or heritage making. Because these processes are based and authorized by textual sources (historical or fictional) and by a more or less authorized heritage discourse, I find useful to define them “textual heritage”.

It is interesting how this kind of heritagization often take place without a visible and tangible embodiment of those “memories”, such as an original building or other authentic material evidences as is the case in the West with the cult of ruins, from Stonehenge to the Foro Romano. In Kyoto this heritagization of places and stories take place almost exclusively upon a spatial coordinate, an invisible – or intangible? – grid that survives upon (or underneath) the modern urban structure and its continual redevelopment.

This overlay of different “Kyotos” is what scholars of urban planning call a palimpsest. The word palimpsest originally indicates a manuscript that has been erased to make possible its reuse as a new blank page, but that at the same time still maintains traces of the original text. This that can then be rediscovered through a careful analysis of the physical medium, usually a parchment.

In literary studies, palimpsest has been used as a metaphor to understand processes of intertextuality (Genette 1982), namely when a text includes and reproduces portions and characteristics of previous texts.

Applied to urban landscape, the idea of palimpsest may help to relativize the opposition between new and old, understanding the mixture of architectural or infrastructural elements that are still visible or readable in the contemporary city. I argue that the metaphor of palimpsest applied to a city may allow new interpretations and readings of the urban space and ecosystem from the point of view of literary studies.

If we “read” Kyoto as a palimpsest where different historical “grids” – or, if you prefer, “texts” – are still visible, we can assume that the most influential one is probably the original plan of the very first “version” of Kyoto, namely Heiankyō, founded in 794 by Emperor Kanmu (737-806). The initial project for the city, modeled on Chinese capitals such as Chang’an, never reached its completion, as large portions of what was supposed to become the western half of the city remained underdeveloped until modern times (Stavros 2014). Most notably, almost no original building from the early 8th century survived until today. Heiankyo is, basically, a long gone city. Despite that, the geometrically designed city having its core in the complex of the imperial palace at the northern side of the square is still readable in the urban structure of nowadays Kyoto, that inherit faithfully the original, squared grid of the original plan. As I said before, Heiankyo as a symbolic ancestor of Kyoto is still today a constant and strong presence in both the memory and identity of the citizens, as well as in the narration of the city as appear in touristic information like historical maps and so.

We can argue that this first, “original” Kyoto we can still read today as a palimpsest is felt more authentic and authoritative than following developments and new embodiments of the city, from medieval times to modern and present days. After all, Heiankyo was the embodiment of the cultural and political power the city had during its “golden age” of the Heian period (794-1185).

My hypothesis is that the feeling of loss of the original Kyoto – repeatedly destroyed by wars and fires during the centuries, especially during the Ōnin War (1467-1477) – together with its enduring *intangible* presence into the memory of Japanese and Kyotese citizens as an “absent heritage” (Harrison 2013, 169-170), affects the way the modern city and its possible developments are constrained and imagined.

In other words, I argue that the forever lost Heiankyo constitutes an obstacle to modern attempts of preservation of the vernacular neighborhoods, becoming on the contrary a justification for the demolition of relatively new houses, especially those being built during the Taisho or early Showa era (first half of 20th century). After all, compared to Heiankyo, these relatively new buildings lack both in authenticity and – if taken singularly – in “outstanding” historical value.

4. THE CITY AS A TEXT

On the other side I want to suggest that, through the mobilization of the concept of textual heritage on the palimpsest of Kyoto, is possible to rethink the historical city as an edited version or a modern

translation – or even mistranslation – of a literary classic. In doing so, new symbolic values and new ways of understand the historic city come into view.

To explain this point I will take the example of the beforementioned Tale of Genji. We have many manuscripts in classical Japanese preserving different versions of the tale, but the great part of the readers read it in a more plain, modern language version, in Japanese or in other languages – “replacements” of the original text (Emmerich). How much authentic are these reconstructions of the text? In the case of translations, almost every word of the text is being replaced by another, correspondent word in a different language. May we compare this process of translation to the way a building is destroyed and replaced, or how portions of the city are preserved, demolished, or modified? If we agree that the answer is yes, then we can start a discussion about how good or bad a certain practice of preservation or reconstruction is, as literary criticism do in judging translations and edited versions of classical works. The opposition between the preservation of authentic material and the need for a more “readable” – that means comfortable and pleasant – living environment becomes less harsh and this opens the way to new perspectives about future “rewritings” or “collations” of the urban “historical text”.

What happened to the great part of nowadays Kyoto is a massive destruction and reconstruction of buildings and neighborhoods, that made “older versions” of the city unrecognizable and unreadable to both visitors and citizens, if not through pictures, recordings and textual sources. If we take again the example of the Tale of Genji, it would be like having just one version of the tale that maintains only few famous passages from the original text, while deleting the rest of the story and replacing it with a modern, easily readable, but deeply different one.

5. STRETCHING THE MEANING OF “TEXT”

To preserve or protect the “old Kyoto” – intended as the totality of physical architectures built before a certain date, let’s say the 60’s – as a whole, in a similar way properties and buildings inscribed in the World Heritage List are, would need an incalculable effort, both economic and social. Moreover, to simply freeze the actual shape of older buildings do not necessarily coincide with the needs of the citizens for comfortable housing and with the right upon their own private properties, as well as the right to rethink public spaces and services, apparently unsuitable to the traditional wooden structures of *machiya*.

But I argue that to reflect on processes of textual heritage may lead to a concept of preservation and authenticity that is even more flexible than what the Nara Documents on Authenticity suggest, and that a compromise between these two positions becomes possible.

First of all, we must extend the meaning of “text” to cover not only a sequence of letters and words on a page or into a speech, codified following a certain language, but also every chains of signifiers. “Text” is every sequence of signs, ordered according to a codified norm or “language”. In these terms also a map may be understood as a kind of “text” that reproduces – or “tells” – a physical space through the use of symbols and signs: lines of different shape and colors to indicate roads and railroads, dots of different size to indicate smaller and bigger cities, a green background for gardens and parks and so on. The same may be said about an architectural blueprint or project. Here the vectorial signs – lines, angles, measurements and so on – give a precise information about how the building should be build in reality. We can think a blueprint as the intangible and textual “code” according which the material and tangible building is embodied.

Actually, the embodiment of the information from textual sources into physical building are not unseen in Japan, especially in Kyoto. One of the clearest examples is the rebuilding of the imperial palace wanted by Emperor Kōkaku (1771-1840) at the beginning of the 19th century, after a fire that destroyed great part of the buildings. What Kōkaku decided to restore were not just the most recent “version” of the palace, but the original and much more imponent look it had during the Heian period.

In doing that, Kōkaku relied on textual sources like drawings and blueprints of the old pavilions and structures, as well as on literary sources describing the social space inside the forbidden city. Kōkaku's intention was indeed not just that of rebuild the palace, but also to restore various intangible practices to be performed in this newly restored space, directly tied to the glory and symbolic capital of the ancient Heian court: ceremonies, processions, poetic gatherings. The political and symbolic meaning of this restoration has been already discussed by scholars of history and literature (Iikura and Morita 2018) but I want to stress is that this rebuild may be seen as a new embodiment of the imperial palace, that has the specific aim to “restore” a specific previous version – the most authoritative one – of that very building. I argue that this is a perfect example of textual heritage, namely a cultural and social practice performed in the present based on various textual sources inherited from the past.

6. TEXTUAL HERITAGE FOR THE FUTURE OF KYOTO

What we can learn from the study of the history of textual heritage is that not only heritage is always changing and renovating itself, but that these transformations aren't necessarily irreversible. Attempts of recovery and restoration of temples and monumental buildings have always been conducted with different levels of accuracy, depending on resources and information available at the time.

It is possible to imagine ways to revert again parking lots and concrete mansions that once were *machiya* into more traditionally shaped architectures, following in a more or less flexible way the rules of the Nara Documents on Authenticity, for example accepting that the new building doesn't need to be perfectly identical to the original one, but just to fulfil some basic requirements for what concerns materials and external look of the buildings.

To effectively merge traditional style with modern techniques of construction could be a stimulating task for contemporary architects and designers, even if the risk of resulting in an unauthentic postmodernist experiment is real. But if we look at these hypothesis from the point of view of textual heritage, we are apt to accept these tentatives in the same way we accept the publishing of new versions and translations of classical works of literature. Just like the classics continue to be rewritten and republished to answer the needs of new modern readers, so the *machiya* may be rethought and rebuilt in a way that gives it new embodiments and meanings. A *machiya* rebuilt from scratch today may be considered less authentic than some older and more monumental architectures like the Nijō castle. But after all the most visited UNESCO site of Kyoto, the Kinkakuji, rebuilt in 1953, is just the last embodiment of a building that maintains its identity and aura of authenticity. From this point of view, repopulate the historical center of Kyoto with brand new *machiya* today can be considered as nothing more than a tentative to give the city just another embodiment, that is much more consistent with the history, tradition, and memory of Kyoto.

The Nara Documents on Authenticity and more recent understandings of the concept of heritage have laid the foundation to reimagine the preservation of Kyoto's historical cityscape in a more flexible, confident way, that has in the rediscovery of traditional forms and styles a way to rethink also their social and public functions.

Literature as a discipline teach us that classics may be re-read, re-written in an infinite array of choices, and still may maintain their identity, even if read in different languages. If we rethink the city as a palimpsest and accept its continual changes and reconstruction as cultural and social processes of heritagization, we may start to imagine the skyline of a new, “old Kyoto”, a sort of re-edition of its traditional and past memory, readable by modern citizens but at the same time felt as “authentic” in a new and wider way.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Textual heritage was the object of a research project titled “World Heritage and East Asian Literatures – Sinitic writings in Japan as cultural heritage [WHEREAL]” that the author carried out from June 2018 to May 2021 thanks to a funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 792809”.

REFERENCES

- Brumann, Christoph. 2010. “Houses in motion: the revitalisation of Kyoto’s architectural heritage.” Christoph Brumann and Rupert Cox (eds.) *Making Japanese Heritage* New York: Routledge.
- Brumann, Christoph, and Aurélie Éliisa Gfeller. 2022. “Cultural landscapes and the UNESCO World Heritage List: perpetuating European dominance.” *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 28, no. 2: 147-162. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2021.1941197>
- Genette, Gérard. 1982. *Palimpsestes - La littérature au second degré*. Paris: Seuil.
- Gerlini, Edoardo, and Kōno Kimiko, eds. 2021. *Koten wa isan ka? Nihon bungaku ni okeru tekusuto isan no riyō to saisōzō (Are Classics a Heritage? Uses and Re-Creations of Textual Heritage in Japanese Literature)*. Tokyo: Bensei.
- Harrison, Rodney. 2013. *Heritage Critical Approaches*. London: Routledge.
- ICOMOS. 1994. *Advisory body evaluation - Historic Monuments of Ancient Kyoto (Kyoto, Uji, and Osu Cities)*. <https://whc.unesco.org/document/154031>
- Iikura, Yōichi, Morita Teiko, eds. 2018. *Bunkashi no naka no Kōkaku Tennō - Chōgi fukkō o sasaeta bungei nettowaaku*. Tokyo: Bensei.
- Smith, Laurajane. 2006. *Uses of Heritage*. London: Routledge.
- Stavros, Matthew. 2014. *Kyoto, an urban history of Japan’s premodern capital*. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press.
- Strippoli, Roberta. 2018. *Dancer, Nun, Ghost, Goddess. The Legend of Giō and Hotoke in Japanese Literature, Theater, Visual Arts, and Cultural Heritage*. Leiden: Brill.
- UNESCO. 1994. *WHC-94/CONF.1/2*. <https://whc.unesco.org/archive/1994/whc-94-conf001-2e.pdf>