



A Journey through Arashiyama: Memory, Landscape, and the Quiet Dialogue between Self and Place

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Abstract

Travel often becomes a mirror that helps us understand ourselves. Landscapes turn into emotional archives, and small encounters with rivers, bridges, and sculptures become quiet teachers that reshape how we see the world. This reflection revisits my academic conference and family trip to Arashiyama, Kyoto in 2019. Four landscapes captured along the journey, namely one of a deep gorge with an emerald river, one of the iconic Katsura River and Togetsukyo Bridge, one of lined tanuki sculptures from a beloved Japanese folktale, and one of the spring skies above the hills; all anchored my memories. Through these visual fragments, I retrace my thoughts, sensations, emotion, and inner dialogues, understanding and exploring how natural scenery, cultural landscapes, and personal histories interact in forming meaning. This paper reflects on movement, wonder, nostalgia, and the subtle shift in perception that arises when one pauses long enough to let a place speak.

Keywords: Arashiyama Kyoto; Place Attachment and Memory; Cultural Landscape Meaning Making; Travel Reflection and Nostalgia; Nature-Based Self-Reflection

Introduction

Arashiyama has long been described as beautiful, but beauty becomes meaningful only when it resonates with the inner landscape of the person who sees it. Landscape scholars remind us that places are never merely physical settings; they are saturated with memory, emotion, and cultural meaning, becoming what some call “landscapes of memory” where personal and collective histories are held and continually reinterpreted [1, 2]. The photographs in Figures 1-5 are not just visual records; they are points of access into this layered landscape of memory, each image capturing a different facet of how Arashiyama spoke to me. My visit on 26 March 2019 was more than a simple my academic conference and family excursion. It became a moment of alignment between memory, emotion, and environment, an example of how travel can awaken the autobiographical self by reconnecting present experience with earlier layers of identity and past selves [3]. All these I consider environmental psychology [4].

As the train carried us through the outskirts of Kyoto toward Arashiyama, I was not only looking out the window. I was revisiting the layers of my own life: the academic routines I had left behind in Malaysia, the responsibilities of teaching and research, and the simple desire to feel alive in a place temporarily freed from deadlines and institutional expectations. Theoretical work on geographical imagination suggests that such journeys are never neutral movements through space; they are interpretive acts in which we map meanings onto landscapes and, in turn, let those landscapes reshape how we imagine ourselves [5]. That day, the sunlight, the cold spring air, the river currents, and the animated faces of my family blended into a single emotional frame. I did not know it then, but these small encounters, would remain vividly in my memory, appearing years later with the same sense of wonder, much like the enduring emotional attachments to specific places described in studies of landscape, heartfelt, and memory [1, 6].

This reflection is therefore an attempt to capture what those landscapes meant to me and why they remain unforgettable, situating my personal experience together with my autoethnography within broader understandings of how memory, place, and identity are intertwined in the human imagination [3, 5].

The Gorge and the Hozugawa River: A Moment of Sudden Awe

The first set of images, shown in Figure 1, captures the steep, rocky gorge and the Hozugawa River cutting sharply through the landscape. I remember seeing scenes like Figure 1A and 1B from the train window; unexpected views that felt almost cinematic. The slopes were covered with dense

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Figure 1: Views of the Hozugawa River along the Arashiyama scenic train route on 26 March 2019. Note: (A) A steep, rocky gorge revealing the dynamic channel morphology of the Hozugawa River, with visible riffles and deep pools shaped by long-term fluvial processes. (B) A calmer river segment displaying the characteristic emerald-green water of the Hozugawa, framed by early spring vegetation along the valley slopes. (C) A bridge crossing over the river, illustrating the interplay between natural landscape and human infrastructure within the Arashiyama gorge. (D) A downstream perspective showing the narrowing river corridor and embankment structures, capturing the geomorphological diversity of the Hozugawa River as seen during the train ride.

vegetation, and the river below moved with both force and softness, creating swirling textures on the surface. This sudden encounter with the Hozugawa gorge evoked what tourism scholars describe as awe: a complex emotion triggered by vast, dramatic, and aesthetically striking natural ecosystem [7], almost ecologically. The sheer scale of the valley, the contrast between bright rock and dark forest, and the dynamic flow of water visible in Figure 1 combined to overwhelm my ordinary perceptual frame, much like the “awe-inspiring” landscapes identified in studies of nature-based destinations. Such moments echoed what literary and cultural landscape studies have observed more generally: rivers and their surrounding terrains often function as narrative and emotional axes, symbolizing the flow of time, the complexity of human relationships, and the quiet endurance of nature, much like the way cultural landscapes evolve through layered historical events and meanings in places such as Gubeikou in Beijing [8]. Perhaps, there is nothing to do ecotoxicological concepts (Figure 1).

What struck me was not only the physical scenery. It was the sensation of depth, both spatial and emotional. The gorge in Figure 1C and 1D seemed like a hidden world that existed parallel to our moving train, and my body responded with the subtle chills and heightened stillness that research associates with awe experiences, including changes in skin conductance and the feeling of goosebumps or expanded attention [9]. What mattered was the long history of admiration embedded in that river valley, similar to the way cultural and historical narratives accumulate around particular riverine sites in many parts of the world [6]. Looking/observing (if only imaginatively) before something that has impressed people across centuries brings a strange humility. Psychological work suggests that awe can expand one’s sense of time, enhance well-being, and shift focus away from narrow self-concerns toward a broader awareness

of interconnectedness [10-12]. It reminds us that beauty does not belong to any one culture or era; it is continuously re-experienced and reinscribed into memory by those who pass through [1].

For me, the gorge symbolized a pause. It offered a brief reminder that nature continues its quiet labour regardless of human concerns and academic deadlines. In a professional life where activity never seems to end, such a landscape becomes a gentle correction: a reminder that stillness and perspective are also part of living. In the language of landscape studies, it was an instance where perception transformed a mere “space” into a “place,” charged with affect, memory, and personal meaning [2,5]. The Hozugawa gorge depicted in Figure 1 thus became not only a visually striking scene but a moment of sudden awe that subtly reoriented my sense of self in relation to time, work, and the more-than-human world [7,12].

Togetsukyo Bridge: The Place Where People and Water Meet

The second group of images, presented in Figure 2, captures a different momentous energy near the iconic Togetsukyo Bridge. This bridge, whose name translates to “Moon Crossing Bridge,” spans the Katsura River and serves as a vital link between the natural and human-made environments.

In Figure 2A, the Katsura River widens and softens into a shimmering surface, creating a scene where families, couples, and travellers gather along the riverbanks. The bridge itself stretches across the water like a gentle invitation, clearly an architectural handshake between the natural slopes of the mountain and the human pathways that traverse it. Bridges such as Togetsukyo are never merely functional structures; they are cultural artefacts that embody engineering heritage, aesthetic values, and historical continuity, serving as symbols of the societies that built and preserved them [13]. Their enduring presence strengthens local identity and supports the tourism economy, much like other scenic cultural sites that merge landscape, architecture, and public experience [14] (Figure 2).

Standing there, I felt something that I often feel when observing rivers: the sense of continuity. The Katsura River, flowing steadily beneath the bridge in Figure 2B and 2C, seemed to hold both ecological depth and cultural resonance. Hydrological studies remind us that rivers are not isolated water bodies but interconnected systems sustained through the hydraulic exchange between surface water and groundwater, forming the ecological backbone that maintains landscape vitality [15-17]. This ecological rhythm mirrors the quiet flow of time, where water shapes the land while adapting to changing seasons, just as rivers in Bhutan or northern Australia are deeply tied to social institutions, ritual practices, and emotional attachments [18, 19]. As someone who studies ecological systems and their fragility, I could not help imagining the Katsura River in different seasonal moods; full during snowmelt, calm in summer, and restless during storms, that all reflecting the dynamic interdependence between water, land, and culture.

Yet, the scene that day was peaceful. It was early spring. The air was cold but not harsh. The hills behind the bridge remained in their pretty tones, waiting for the first burst of green. In Arashiyama, the flowing river, the open sky, and the iconic bridge created a natural stage where bodies, emotions, and material features came together in silent choreography, similar to how open-air landscapes function as scenographic environments that shape personal and shared experiences [2].



Figure 2: Views of the Katsura River at Arashiyama on 26 March 2019. Note: (A) The iconic Togetsukyo Bridge spanning the Katsura River, with early spring visitors gathering along the riverbank and the forested Arashiyama hills forming a scenic backdrop. (B) A downstream perspective illustrating the wide and gently flowing section of the Katsura River, with gravel and cobblestone banks typical of this stretch of the river corridor. (C) A broader landscape view showing the riverside settlement, seasonal vegetation, and surrounding hills, capturing the calm and reflective atmosphere of the Katsura River during early spring.

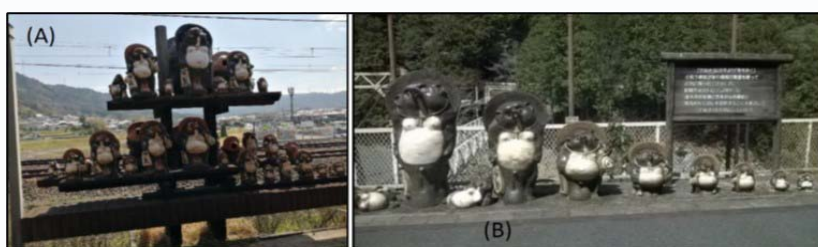


Figure 3: Tanuki statues displayed at the train station in Arashiyama on 26 March 2019. Note: (A) A grouped arrangement of tanuki figurines positioned overlooking the railway tracks, illustrating the playful and symbolic presence of these folklore characters in everyday public spaces. (B) A row of larger tanuki statues situated beside an informational signboard, representing the cultural tradition of placing tanuki as icons of good fortune, humour, and hospitality within Japanese landscapes.

In that moment, I was reminded of how essential it is to slow down, observe, and allow the world to seep into memory without rushing. This reflective stillness speaks directly to the idea that landscapes shape inner narratives as much as we project meaning onto them, forming the emotional scaffolding through which we revisit our past selves and create new memories [3]. The Togetsukyo Bridge in Figure 2, standing gracefully between mountain and river, became for me not only a physical crossing but a symbolic reminder of the enduring relationship between people and water, a genuine relationship that is ecological, cultural, emotional, and deeply human.

The Tanuki Statues: Folklore, Playfulness, and Cultural Bridges

The third photograph series, shown in Figure 3, presents a row and cluster of tanuki (raccoon-dog) statues, an iconic figure in Japanese folklore known for its humour, generosity, and sometimes mischief. Seeing them lined up along the walkway and beside the railway (Figure 3A and 3B) felt like stepping into an anime scene, the kind many people grow up watching. Folklorists have shown how the tanuki has long occupied a liminal position in Japanese cultural imagination, associated with transformation, trickery, and the playful haunting of modern spaces such as railways and urban streets [20, 21]. These figures reminded me that landscapes are not only geomorphological forms; they are also cultural stages populated

by stories, symbols, and commemorations that materialize collective memory [2] (Figure 3).

These statues softened the landscape. They introduced a playful note amidst the serious geology of mountains and rivers experienced in Figures 1 and 2. I remember smiling when I saw them. They reminded me that every culture has its ways of blending imagination with the physical environment. In Malaysia, we use stories to connect people to the land such as LAT's comics on Kampung lively lives. In Japan, the tanuki stands as a guardian of whimsy and a shape-shifting storyteller that links older folk beliefs with contemporary popular culture [20, 21]. This resonates with research on indigenous and minority communities, such as the Ainu in Hokkaido, who construct "places of memory" through monuments and ritual practices that assert cultural presence and historical continuity in specific locations [22]. While the tanuki statues are not indigenous memorials, they similarly inscribe identity and narrative into the everyday landscape, making place into a living text that can be read, felt, and enjoyed.

Looking at them, I felt a gentle recognition of shared human tendencies: the desire to create characters, to animate the world, to infuse daily life with humour and warmth. Travel often reveals these parallels. Even as we move through foreign landscapes, we find echoes of our own childhoods, beliefs, and memories. Such resonances illustrate how landscapes can act as mediators between different

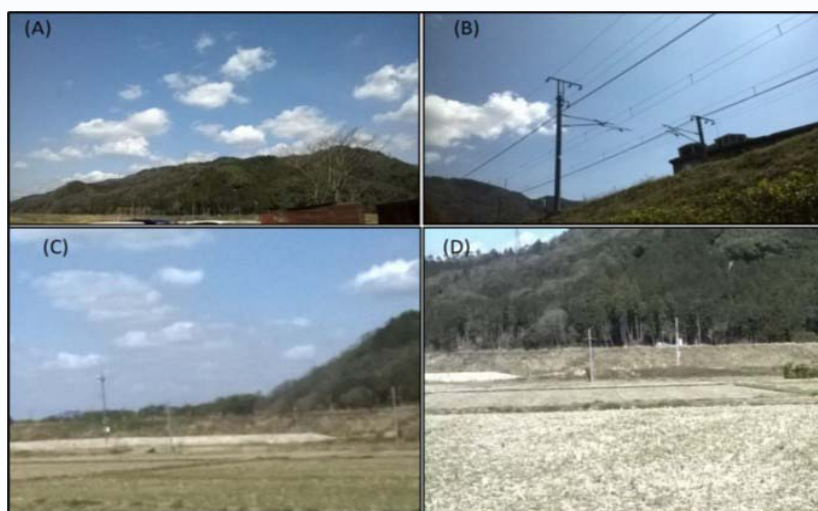


Figure 4: Springtime landscapes observed during the walk to the train station at Arashiyama on 26 March 2019. Note: (A) A panoramic view of the surrounding hills under a bright spring sky, capturing the gentle transition from winter dormancy to early seasonal renewal. (B) Railway infrastructure cutting across the hillside, illustrating the coexistence of natural scenery and human mobility systems within the Arashiyama area. (C) Open agricultural fields bordered by low hills, revealing the rural character that frames the outskirts of Arashiyama during early spring. (D) A closer view of cultivated plots and forest margins, highlighting the mosaic of farmland and woodland typical of the landscape leading toward the station.

cultural imaginaries, allowing visitors to recognize both difference and familiarity in the same scene [3,5]. In Arashiyama, the tanuki statues captured in Figure 3 became small but significant bridges between my own narrative world and the cultural stories embedded in Japanese space.

The Spring Sky: A Quiet Closure to the Day

The final sequence of images in Figures 4 and 5 shows the wider spring landscape and the railway that framed the end of the day. Figure 4A-D presents a wide blue sky dotted with spring clouds above soft hills and agricultural fields covered in early-season vegetation. After all the movement, all the sights, and all the conversations, this sky and these open fields felt like a natural ending to the day. Psychological work on autobiographical memory suggests that such “closure moments” are important anchors in the mental reconstruction of experience; they help individuals organize events into coherent episodes linked to a sense of self across time [3]. The quiet sky above Arashiyama, and the gently receding countryside in Figure 4, became that anchor for me, framing the day as a complete yet open story in my memory.

Sometimes the simplest images become the most enduring. The sky and fields in Figure 4 mirror the inner quiet I felt after exploring Arashiyama with my family. It is an image of contentment, of having walked through a landscape not as a tourist ticking off locations, but as a person allowing meaning to unfold gradually. The straight railway lines captured in Figure 5, leading the eye toward the distance, symbolized a return to everyday life while still carrying the emotional resonance of the day's experiences. Geographical imagination research argues that maps, routes, and vistas are not only external objects but also internal narratives through which we navigate our own identities [5]. That evening walks back to the station, with the spring sky overhead and the railway ahead, re-mapped my inner landscape, connecting professional fatigue, familial joy, and aesthetic appreciation into a single, gentle storyline (Figure 5).

Walking back to the station that day, I felt grateful. Not because the place was famous, but because it reminded me of the core elements



Figure 5: Railway tracks at the Arashiyama train station. This view captures the central railway line running through the Arashiyama station area, illustrating the integration of everyday transportation infrastructure with the surrounding residential and traditional architectural setting. The perspective emphasizes the linearity and depth of the tracks, symbolizing movement, connectivity, and the transitional experience of arriving at or departing from Arashiyama.

that shape my way of thinking: attentiveness to nature, curiosity about culture, and appreciation for moments shared with family. In this sense, Arashiyama that evoked across Figures 1 to 5, became what landscape theorists describe as a “storied place,” where environment, memory, and imagination converge to sustain both personal and collective meanings over time [6].

Conclusion

This reflection is not about the tourist sites of Arashiyama. It is about how the place touched my internal world. The gorge, the river, the tanuki sculptures, and the spring sky each spoke to a different part of my identity. They reminded me of the joy of discovery, the comfort of being together with my family, and the importance of engaging

with the world not just through research protocol-based analysis but through presence and experiential learnings.

My autoethnography allows these quiet moments to be recorded with honesty. In revisiting these photographs years later, I realize that the landscapes of Arashiyama have become part of my personal geography. They accompany me in memory, shaping how I see nature, culture, and myself.

Travel ends, but the reflections it inspires the living human beings continue to grow.

Declaration on the Use of Artificial Intelligence

The author declares that generative artificial intelligence tools were used in a supportive capacity during the preparation of this manuscript. These tools assisted with language refinement, structural organisation, and stylistic clarity of the text. All ideas, interpretations, reflections, and conclusions presented in this paper are the author's own and are grounded in personal experience and scholarly judgment. The author retains full responsibility for the content, accuracy, originality, and integrity of the manuscript.

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