

Deborah Mantle (text) and Markuz Wernli Saito (photographs) go face to face with Kyoto's social artery

Did you see Hanako...?

Sure. And Hiroshi is there, too.

Who the heck are Hiroshi and Hanako...?

# One river, many faces

Spend a short time at any time or at any place along the river and you will soon come to the conclusion that there is not one Kamogawa, there are many.



**A place of space**  
A Saturday afternoon in June – the sky is blue, the water sparkles and there are

people, many people. Kazunari Nagai sits on the river bank, near Sanjo bridge, with a pineapple cooler in his hand. Next to him are a small turntable, a pile of records and some comic books. In the little time off he has as a trainee priest, the river is one of the few places in Kyoto where Nagai has the space to relax

and do his own thing. The water flows, the music plays. "The sound is good," he says, and smiles.

**A friendly place**

The river is a place to be alone and to be with friends, two or four-footed. Since making a temporary move from Saitama to Kyoto to begin her preliminary studies as a maiko, Chihiro walks along the river four times a day with her dog,

Kotaro. Wearing a wide-brimmed hat to protect her fair skin, Chihiro says she likes being close to the water. Still a junior high school student, Chihiro hopes she and Kotaro can return to Kyoto in the future.

**A playground**

A little time later, a little further north, Mr. and Mrs. Yamada are relaxing after a two-hour cycle ride from Yamashina. Still full of energy, their two young children are in the water, on the stepping stones, in the water again, searching for small crabs, shrimp and fish for their aquarium back home. "The crabs can live about two years," says Mr. Yamada. As a child him-

self, Mr. Yamada remembers a different river where kimono makers washed their fabric in the water, where people collected and ate black riverweed (kawanori) and trams trundled alongside. According to Mr. Yamada, things have changed for the better. Now there are bike paths along the river, more people are walking and the area is more attractive.

**Bonding and broken bones**

Across the frog and turtle stepping stones and moving south, the path opens into a wide concreted area currently occupied by stunt cyclists and skateboarders. University student, Masayan (a nickname) and his cycling friends usually stop off there for an hour or two after shopping. Sharing their space is a group of Doshisha senior high school students. All their attention is focused on crafting a skateboard ramp out of a wooden bench, some metal accessories and a lot of wax. T-shirt-less in the afternoon sun, Motoyuki nods to one of his friends. "He broke his leg skateboarding," he says matter-of-factly. Frequent visitors to the

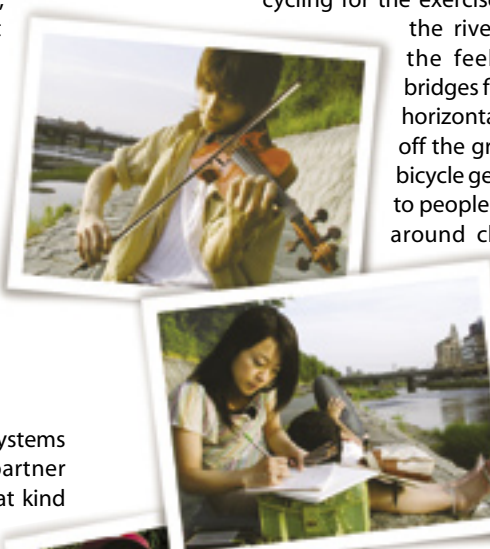


Confluence of people on Demachiyanagi

river, the skateboarding friends spend six or seven hours at a time there. When asked what the river means to them, one boy says, "a dating spot"; another, "it's Kyoto life."

**A concert hall**

It's late on Saturday afternoon and while couples sit like equidistant knots on a rope stretched either side of Sanjo Bridge, Shu Watanabe is about to stage his first open air concert. A university student, Watanabe has a permanent red mark on his neck where the violin rests. With an audience of five – one a friend, and a couple who happen to be within ear-shot – he begins to play. The river, the voices, the city – all are gone. A string breaks, but the music doesn't stop. Finally, the piece ends, we are back at the river and Watanabe's exclusive audience claps in deep appreciation.



**Serenity**

A little further south, Yukiko Yoshida, a systems engineer, sits sketching while her partner sleeps, his head resting in her lap. What kind of place is the Kamogawa? "Calm," she says quietly.

**A workplace**

Meanwhile, standing on the southeast corner of Shijo bridge, Kazuo Kitamura is working. He has been selling 'The Big Issue', the magazine sold by homeless people, for 18 months now. Although from Osaka, Kitamura travels to Kyoto because sales are better here. "Big Issue buyers are all ages, all kinds of people," he says. Alternating between the bridge and the front of Takashimaya department store, Kitamura enjoys being near the river, although sunburn can be a problem, he adds, pulling down his red cap.



**A place to fly**  
Trying to work less and enjoy life more was what Kunihiro Shoda drew to the Kamogawa. Diagnosed with

diabetes five years before, Shoda took up cycling for the exercise and now rides along the river every day. He loves the feeling of speed as the bridges fly by. Positioned almost horizontal on his bicycle, a foot off the ground, Shoda's unusual bicycle gets him close to the river, to people and animals. "Weaving around children and dogs; it's like being on a jet coaster. It's fun."



**A pastime**

Another day, time, place – the same river. It's 7.25 on a Thursday morning due north of Demachiyanagi. It's wilder here

and there are few people. Mrs. Haji has just finished her daily walk and music practice by the river. She began playing the 'ocarina', a flute-like instrument the size and shape of a small mango, nearly six months ago. According to Haji, spring is the nicest season because the cherry blossoms are out along the banks. This spring one of the mallard ducks had five ducklings. "There's always something to see here," she says.



**A childhood of cherries**

On the opposite bank, local residents Mr. and Mrs. Yamano are collecting and tasting the fruits of the cherry trees. Wearing matching knitted waistcoats and sports shoes, the Yamanos say they walk two or three kilometres everyday, but not if it is raining or too cold. For them, the river offers a place to exercise, come across friends, pick flowers and see birds, fish and turtles. The cherries are small, a little sour and very tasty. "We ate them when we were young," says Mrs. Yamano. They continue walking. Mrs. Yamano has cherries in one hand, wild flowers in the other.



to work; he gets to walk, see nature and do something important. "If there is trash around, people think it's OK to leave garbage. If we keep the area clean and beautiful, people tend to keep it clean," he explains.

**Domestic bliss?**

Finally, it is time to talk to some river residents. Three ducks – Hanako, Hiroshi and Hiroki – offer some thoughts between beakfuls of weed. "This is the Kamo river, our river," says Hanako. "But you wouldn't think it from the way all you people act."

**Where the heart is**

Mi-chan, in ginger fur and a red collar, lives with her owner under a nearby bridge. She is a cat of few words. What is the Kamogawa for her, I ask. "It's my home," she says simply.

**KTO**

