

Research on the Japanese Tea Ceremony

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Abstract

Tea culture is a crucial component of Japanese culture, and tea ceremony has had a far-reaching influence on the development of Japanese culture and society. Japanese tea and tea culture originated in China during the the Tang Dynasty (618-906 A D). After Chinese tea and tea culture were introduced to Japan, the tea culture in Japan still demonstrated distinct Chinese cultural elements, especially the traits of Chinese Buddhism. However, through the inheritance, development, and innovation of generations of Japanese tea masters, a Japanese tea ceremony with Japanese ethnic characteristics was gradually formed. It has developed into a comprehensive art system that centers on drinking tea and integrates various cultural aspects such as architecture, horticulture, religion, and aesthetics. It also has important implications for the concepts of public life, aesthetics, and art design in Japan. Tea culture was first brought to Japan by Japanese ambassadors dispatched to China and Japanese Buddhist monks who had studied in Tang Dynasty, China, such as Eichu, Saicho, and Kukai. The spread and development of the Japanese tea ceremony culture have gone through four stages, and the most important and glorious one took place during the Edo era. As the Japanese tea ceremony evolved, it presented the form of Tang-style tea party, Shoin (meaning “large reception room”) tea ceremony, Soan (meaning “grass hut”) tea ceremony, and so on. During the period, some representative tea masters emerged, such as Murata Juko, Takeno Jo-o, and Sen no Rikyu. The core value of Japanese tea ceremony culture lies in Zen or “chazenichimi” (meaning “Zen and tea ceremony are the same”), the essence of which is “Wa, Ke, Sei, and Jaku” (harmony, respect, purity, and tranquility).

Keywords

Japanese tea ceremony; Chazenichimi; Wabi-Sabi; Wa, Ke, Sei, and Jaku.

1. Introduction

The term “tea ceremony” first appeared in Tang Dynasty, China. At that time, the tea ceremony was already beyond drinking tea and had become an elegant and spiritual cultural activity. Shortly afterwards, the tea ceremony was brought to Japan and, combined with Japanese cultural traditions, it developed and became a comprehensive cultural system that possesses a profound philosophy and rich artistic expression. [1]

Tea culture that is represented by the tea ceremony is a crucial component of Japanese culture, which significantly affects the development of Japanese society. Exploration and research on the culture of the Japanese tea ceremony are essential for understanding Japanese history, culture, art, aesthetics, and Sino-Japanese cultural exchanges.

2. The Origin of Japanese Tea and Tea Culture

Japanese tea and tea culture originated in China. Before being influenced by Chinese culture, the Japanese did not produce tea, nor did they have the habit of drinking it. In the Tang Dynasty, Japanese ambassadors who were dispatched to China and the Buddhist monks who had studied there brought Chinese tea and tea culture back to Japan first.

It was in the middle of the Tang era that Chinese tea culture reached its peak, which was marked by the publishing of *The Classic of Tea* by Lu Yu in 780 AD. [5] From then on, tea drinking was not just simply eating and drinking but was a kind of spiritual culture. Before 780 AD, 21 groups of Japanese ambassadors who were dispatched to China during the Sui and Tang Dynasties had already returned to Japan.[5] It remained unknown whether these ambassadors were interested in tea drinking and tea drinking culture while staying in China. In fact, they did not bring tea seeds, tea cakes (unlike the prevailing loose-leaf tea at present, tea leaves were manufactured in the shape of a cake in the Tang Dynasty) or tea drinking culture back to Japan. Chinese tea culture was developed rapidly between 780-805 AD. [5] But it wasn't introduced to Japan because no Japanese vessels dispatched to China came back to Japan during this period. Later, some Buddhist monks, such as Eichu who travelled to China in 775 AD and returned to Japan in 805 AD, Kukai (774-835 AD) who went to study in China in 804 AD and returned in 805, and Saicho (767-822 AD) who went to study in China in 804 AD and returned in 806 AD, acutely realized the changes in Chinese tea culture.[5] They found that the Chinese upper class, intellectuals, and monks in the Tang Dynasty were all keen on drinking and extolling tea poetically. They also acknowledged that tea drinking in China was not just drinking (to quench thirst) or for medical use (in ancient and contemporary China, tea has always been considered to have medical virtues to cure diseases). Just like practicing music, chess, calligraphy, and painting, tea drinking was an essential accomplishment for intellectuals to cultivate their temperament, and monks to practice Buddhist meditation. Thus, Eichu, Kukai, and Saicho embarked on a mission to spread this advanced Tang culture, and brought tea seeds and tea cakes, along with tea-related poems and tea culture, back to Japan.

According to *Hiesha Shintō Himitsuki* (A Secret Record of Shinto at Hiesha), the monk Saicho, who established the Buddhist school of Japanese Tendai, visited Tiantai Mountain in Zhejiang, China to study Buddhism during the reign of Emperor Kanmu (781-808 AD). He returned to Japan in 805 AD and planted the tea seeds that he brought from China at the Hiesha Shrine in the foothills of Mount Hiei. It becomes the oldest tea garden in Japan now. To this day, tea trees still grow around the monument to the Hiesha Tea Garden to the east of Mount Hiei, Kyoto.

3. The Historical Development of the Japanese Tea Culture

The Japanese tea culture began in the upper class and was then popularized to the public. The Chinese tea culture, which symbolized an advanced culture then, was introduced to the Japanese royal court by Japanese envoys sent to China and monks who had studied in China. It was then spread from the court to the aristocratic class and finally popularized and developed among the general public. Actually, the development of the Japanese tea ceremony was consistently influenced by the vogue of tea drinking and tea culture in China. The historical development of the Japanese tea ceremony could be roughly divided into four stages.

The first stage is in the Heian era (794-1192 AD). The Japanese did not know how to cook tea using a tea cake (namely, grinding tea cakes into tea powder and brewing the powder in boiling water). During this phase, Japan had not yet formed a fashion of drinking tea. The Japanese upper classes, including the emperors, aristocrats, and senior monks, just mimicked the advanced Tang culture by drinking tea. During the Konin era (810-824 AD), tea drinking started to gain popularity and brought about the golden era of tea culture in ancient Japan, which is referred to as "the Konin tea vogue" in history. In this period, Japanese tea culture was only a physical and spiritual copy of the tea culture in Lu Yu's *The Classic of Tea* produced during the Tang Dynasty. It should be noted that the milestone of this period shall be Eichu's serving tea to the emperor. The official Japanese history book *Nihon Koki* recorded that Emperor Saga visited Shiga Prefecture in the sixth year of Konin (815 AD). When the emperor passed by the Bonshakuji Temple, the Buddhist monk of the temple, Eichu, offered the emperor the tea that

he himself brewed by following the customs in the Tang Dynasty, and the emperor rewarded Eichu with a royal headwear. This was the earliest record of the emperor's drinking tea in the official history of Japan. Two months later (June of the same year), Emperor Saga ordered tea to be cultivated in regions such as Kinai, Oumi, Tanba, and Harima to provide annual tribute. Hence, drinking tea gradually became popular in the royal court and among the aristocrats. Eichu was regarded as the pivotal figure who promoted "the Konin tea vogue".

The second stage is in the era including the Kamakura, Muromachi, and Azuchi-Momoyama periods (1192-1603 AD) in Japanese history. Influenced by the whisking tea brewing method used in the Chinese Song Dynasty (unlike the method in the Tang Dynasty, the whisking tea brewing method brews tea powder in a tea bowl instead of a pot, and uses porcelain bottle to boil and brew; then slightly whisks the tea until there is froth, and the tea is ready to be served), the Japanese adopted China's tea competition culture during the Kamakura era (1185-1333 AD). In the late Kamakura era, Japanese tea culture was gradually popularized around Japan with temples as the center of dissemination. The monk Eisai (1141-1215 AD), who lived in the Kamakura era, was a noteworthy figure that visited China during the Song Dynasty in 1168 and 1187 AD to study Zen Buddhism, and he brought the tea culture of the Song Dynasty back to Japan. In 1121, he completed the first scholastic Japanese tea book *Kissa Yojoki* ("How to Stay Healthy by Drinking Tea"), which facilitated the popularization of tea drinking and tea culture among Japanese aristocrats and monks. If we were to say that the Japanese tea culture in the first stage used to be entirely modelled on the Chinese tea culture, then the second stage is the initial phase when the Japanese tea ceremony started to take shape, and Japan both absorbed Chinese tea culture and embraced Japanese ethnic cultures. The second stage is of primary importance in the history of the Japanese tea ceremony.

The third stage is in the Edo era (1603-1868 AD). When Chinese tea culture's influence on the Japanese tea ceremony was on the wane, the culture of the Japanese tea ceremony matured in this era. Japanese tea culture was popular among people of all social standings, and different schools of tea ceremony were formed. The Edo era was the pinnacle of the culture of the Japanese tea ceremony.[4]

The fourth stage is in the modern times of Japan, and it lasted from the Meiji Restoration to the present (1868 AD to present). The Japanese tea ceremony gradually integrated into the daily lives of the Japanese. People not only regard the tea ceremony as an activity of cultivating their temperament and artistic sense, but also as a daily activity to connect with friends. It is worth noting that after the Meiji Restoration, the male monopoly on the Japanese tea ceremony gradually disintegrated. During the Showa era, female practitioners of the tea ceremony surged, and girls were required to learn the tea ceremony before marriage.[6] In this stage, the culture of the Japanese tea ceremony is integrated into the daily lives of the public and develops steadily. These stages are classified by the periodization of the history of the Japanese tea ceremony. As for the evolution of the forms of tea ceremony, the Japanese tea ceremony took on the forms of Tang-style tea party, Shoin tea ceremony, and Soan tea ceremony. The Tang-style tea party became popular in the early stage of the Japanese tea ceremony, and it was almost entirely modelled after the tea culture and tea drinking rituals of the Tang Dynasty approximately during the aforementioned first stage.

The art of Shoin tea ceremony came into being during the Muromachi era and was named after the Shoin (meaning "study") architecture that developed at the time. Tea ceremonies were held in buildings of Shoin, and the tea houses ought to be filled with solemn silence. The hosts and guests conversed with each other succinctly and sat on their knees, while the hosts served tea to the guests in a stately manner. Shoin tea ceremony emphasized the appreciation of objects of the Tang Dynasty and systematic etiquettes. The representative practitioner of Shoin tea ceremony was Ashikaga Yoshimasa, the eighth shogun of the Muromachi era. However, the leading figure was actually Noami (1397-1471 AD), who served as Yoshimasa's cultural

councilor. Naomi was an outstanding artist; a master of calligraphy, painting, and tea ceremony; and a connoisseur of antiques and artworks.

Soan tea ceremony is seen as the form of tea ceremony that epitomizes Japanese features. Soan tea ceremony, which embodies genuine Japanese culture, was formed during the Edo era. From the Kokufu Bunka, the Japanese indigenous culture gradually merged with foreign cultures and became independent. All of the Japanese culture and arts had broken away from the Chinese model and developed their own styles. Under this cultural backdrop, Murata Juko (1423-1502 AD) adopted the simple style of folk tea ceremony based on Shoin tea ceremony, and put forward the Wabi-Cha form of the tea ceremony. His aesthetics not only demonstrated the exterior beauty, but also emphasized the interior beauty to restore the mind and pursue a religious goal through retrospection. He changed the luxuriant style of Shoin tea ceremony into the style of Soan tea ceremony, venerating nature and using rustic tea utensils. After Juko, Takeno Jo-o (1502-1555 AD) introduced the theory of Japanese waka to the tea ceremony, which revived the simplicity and elegance of Japanese culture in Soan tea ceremony. Sen no Rikyu (1522-1592 AD) epitomized the predecessors' aesthetics after Jo-o, and established the form and content of Soan tea ceremony.[3]

4. Key Figures in the Inheritance and Development of the Japanese Culture of Tea Ceremony & Their Thoughts on Tea Ceremony

At the very beginning, the tea culture that Eichu, Kukai, and Saicho brought to Japan from the Tang Dynasty was mature and complete. It not only included material things such as tea-planting, tea-producing, tea-drinking, and tea utensils, but also incorporated spiritual aspects such as tea-related poems, tea literature, and rituals of drinking tea. Particularly, tea culture was introduced to Japan as an advanced spiritual culture initially; in other words, the cultural function instead of a material function of tea culture received more regard when it was first introduced to Japan. This is the obvious characteristic of Japanese tea culture. In addition, it is important to note that Eichu, Kukai, and Saicho were monks who studied Buddhism in China, so it was natural for them to focus on, inherit, and develop some cultural traits of tea and Buddhism. As a result, Japanese tea culture has always been carrying a touch of Zen Buddhism. In terms of the spirit of tea ceremony, Murata Juko, the founder of Soan tea ceremony during the Muromachi era, brought Zen in Buddhism to the tea ceremony and paved the way for "Chazenichimi", which provided the theoretical basis for tea ceremony. Establishing Soan tea ceremony as opposed to Shoin tea ceremony, Juko was an advocate of a simple, natural, and plain style of tea ceremony that incorporates art, ethics, and religion, promoting the natural beauty of Japan. Murata Juko asserted that beauty in incomplete things represented a higher state of beauty and contained the essence of Zen Buddhism.

Takeno Jo-o, the successor of Juko, brought the theory of classical Japanese poetry into tea ceremony with the belief that the ultimate states of tea ceremony and poetry should be the same. He applied "the beauty of Tanpaku" (meaning "the beauty of being light and simple") in Japanese poetry to the tea ceremony, supplemented and refined Juko's theory of tea ceremony, and put forward the concept of "Wabi-Cha". He used a myriad of folk objects as tea utensils, advanced the development of ethnic culture in Soan tea ceremony, and contributed to the further Japanification of the tea ceremony. Another achievement of Takeno Jo-o was that he educated the outstanding tea master---Sen no Rikyu.

Based on the groundwork of Murata Juko and Takeno Jo-o, Sen no Rikyu epitomized the Japanese tea ceremony. He further practiced, promoted, and refined the "Wabi-Cha" form of the tea ceremony. He proposed "Wa, Ke, Sei and Jaku" as the tenet of tea ceremony, and created the complete art system of the Japanese tea ceremony. His tea ceremony was regarded as highly as a new religion, and was referred to as "the religion of nature" and "the religion of beauty" by

some people. Moreover, he created norms not only for the Japanese tea ceremony that endured from then to now, but also for Japanese national art.

The Japanese word “侘” (わび, Wabi) originally meant a solitary and dismal state of life. Inspired by the Chinese language and culture, it was later written as the kanji “侘” and, due to the compound ideogram of “侘”, which means “a person in the house”, it produced derivatives like “屋人”, “侘人”, and “侘住”, meaning to perceive and enjoy freedom and solitude by living reclusively. In the “Wabi-Cha” form of tea ceremony, “Wabi” represents enduring loneliness when staying alone and being able to perceive and enjoy loneliness in interpersonal communication. The “Wabi-Cha” form of the tea ceremony is an aesthetic ritual and process that is non-utilitarian and is aimed at meeting friends via tea, practicing Buddhist meditation, and cultivating one’s temperament. The four-word tenet “Wa, Ke, Sei and Jaku” of the “Wabi-Cha” aims to ultimately reach “Sabi” from “Wabi.” [9] It elucidates a high aesthetic level that eliminates material luxury, accepts simplicity and poverty, and pursues a plain life where “all is void”, as described in Zen Buddhism.

“Wa, Ke, Sei, and Jaku” is considered as the tenet of the Japanese tea ceremony. “Wa” means harmony, while “Ke” means reverence, purity, and honesty. “Wa” and “Ke” embody the harmony and respect for humans, objects, and nature. They also represent the inner harmony, respect, and purity of tea drinkers. “Sei” means purity, seclusion, loneliness, and calmness, while “Jaku” means eliminating desire in tranquility. “Sei” and “Jaku” not only require the environment of drinking tea to be clean and elegant, but also need tea drinkers to maintain their inner purity, elegance, and tranquility by contemplating and eliminating their desires. If “Wa” and “Ke” are mainly the requirements for extrinsic behaviors, then “Sei” and “Jaku” focus more on cultivating the state of mind.

The spirit of the Japanese tea ceremony places emphasis on the Zen aesthetics, and the ideological essence of the culture of the Japanese tea ceremony is Zen, which is commonly known as “Chazenichimi”. On the one hand, ideas of Zen are infiltrated into tea; in other words, the wisdom of Zen is contained and perceived through tea. On the other hand, one can practice meditation through the secular activity of tea drinking. That is a spiritual activity that transcends secular life.

5. The Influence of Japanese Tea Ceremony on Japanese Life and Arts

The tea ceremony is ubiquitous in Japanese life. The prevailing Japanese tea ceremony has a considerable impact on the local culture of Japan, and also perfects the overall temperament of the nation. In the fields of ideologies, cultural institutions, aesthetics, and even industrial and artistic designs, we can feel the highly complete cultural philosophies in the art of the Japanese tea ceremony. Japanese tea ceremony’s influence on Japanese culture is not limited to enriching art elements and concepts, but more importantly, it elaborates and integrates relevant emotional connotations. Nowadays, as the inheritance and development of multi-cultures are mellowing, there are many conceptions, connotations, and specific elements related to the art of the Japanese tea ceremony in the entire Japanese cultural system. Systematic exploration and research will certainly help people achieve the ideal of inheriting cultural heritage.

The tea ceremony is not merely the core of the cultural system of tea; moreover, the values and ideas in the art of tea ceremony can offer significant cues for people to understand the specific connotations of traditional tea culture.

6. Conclusion

Japanese tea and tea culture originated in China. In the past, Japanese envoys who were sent to the Tang Dynasty and monks who studied in China brought tea and tea culture back to Japan.

The Japanese tea culture began in the upper class and was then popularized to the public. The development of the Japanese culture started from the upper class such as the court and senior monks, then spread to the middle and lower classes, and finally was disseminated and popularized among the masses. The Japanese have inherited some of the elements of Chinese tea culture, and formed its own culture with Japanese ethnic characteristics through the effort of Japanese tea masters of past generations. With the development and innovation of the Japanese tea ceremony, Zen culture has always been inherited as the core idea of tea culture. The Japanese have awakened to many truths about philosophy and life through the tea ceremony. The tea ceremony is not just a part of Japanese people's daily life, but also a part of their spiritual beliefs. The culture of the Japanese tea ceremony is a crucial component of Japanese culture, and has a remarkable effect on Japanese culture and society.

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