

Japanese Tea Ceremony: How it became a unique symbol of the Japanese culture and shaped the Japanese aesthetic views

Yixiao Zhang

Hangzhou No.2 High School of Zhejiang Province,
CHINA.

lareinazhang@126.com

ABSTRACT

In the process of globalization and cultural exchange, Japan has realized a host of astonishing achievements. With its unique cultural identity and aesthetic views, Japan has formed a glamorous yet mysterious image on the world stage. To have a comprehensive understanding of Japanese culture, the study of Japanese tea ceremony could be of great significance. Based on the historical background of Azuchi-Momoyama period, the paper analyzes the approaches Sen no Rikyu used to have the impact. As a result, the impact was not only on the Japanese tea ceremony itself, but also on Japanese culture and society during that period and after. Research shows that Tea-drinking was brought to Japan early in the Nara era, but it was not integrated into Japanese culture until its revival and promotion in the late medieval periods under the impetus of the new social and religious realities of that age. During the Azuchi-momoyama era, the most significant reform took place; 'Wabicha' was perfected by Takeno Jōō and his disciple Sen no Rikyu. From environmental settings to tea sets used in the ritual to the spirit conveyed, Rikyu reregulated almost all aspects of the tea ceremony. He removed the entertaining content of the tea ceremony, and changed a rooted aesthetic view of Japanese people. Four most valued doctrines of Japanese tea art, "Wa Kei Sei Jaku", were also put forward by Rikyu. Under his influence, simple tea houses became popular, and "Wabicha" prevailed among samurai warriors and then spread among almost all hierarchies.

Keywords: Sen no Rikyu, Wabi, Tea Ceremony, Japanese Culture

1. INTRODUCTION

Before Nara era, there was no tea tree in Japan, and so was the custom of drinking tea. However, as cultural communication became frequent between the two countries, tea (as well as tea ceremony) was brought to Japan. Thanks to the efforts made by some enthusiasts in this field, tea was perfectly combined with Japanese culture and therefore generated a unique form of tea ceremony-the Japanese tea ceremony.

In fact, there are mainly two branches of tea ceremony in Japan, Tencha and Sencha. Yet when talking about Japanese tea ceremony, it usually refers to Tencha, which originated from China and was then developed by Murata Mokichi (Shuka), Takeno Jouo, and Sen no Rikyu. And throughout history, the development of tea ceremony could be divided into three periods: first the Heian era, influenced by Tang Dynasty in China, was the time before tea ceremony took place; then is the period from Kamakura era to Azuchi-momoyama era, influenced by Song Dynasty, was when tea ceremony began to reform and prevail the society; last is the Edo period when tea ceremony had its form almost shaped.

In Japanese society, tea ceremony is not only considered as a form of self-cultivation, but a fundamental morality of life and spiritual support to rely on. Why is it? Why do Japanese people cherish this culture so much and how does this view prevail among Japanese people? To answer these questions, it would be necessary to examine one certain period-Azuchi-momoyama era, and one person-Sen no Rikyu.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1 History of Tea in Japan

Tea originally came from China in Nara era (8th century) by Japanese mission to China. At that time, the tea brought to Japan was ball-shaped half fermented tea and was used mostly as medicine.

Then, in Kamakura era (12-14th century), green powdered tea was brought to Japan by Zen Buddhism monks (Eisai, Dogen, etc). It was also introduced as medicine. But different from 8th century, it was used for spiritual exercise along with the spread of Zen Buddhism. Despite the refreshing effect tea served to the Zen monks, the process of making and drinking the tea was regarded as a divine ritual in achieving the state of Zen. So when aristocrats began to embrace Zen Buddhism for the progressiveness it represents, as well as the spirit it pursues, tea became widely-spread among those aristocrats as an indivisible part of the Zen Buddhism.

Later in Muromachi era (14-16th century), Chinese tea utensils were loved and to use these utensils on the tea ceremony became an honor among feudal lords. Samurai and aristocrats organize tea ceremony to show off their wealth, while later Murata Mokichi defined the ideal tea ceremony as one that emphasizes the spiritual communication between host and guest. And so, “Wabi (state of calm) cha” was created. The environment of tea ceremony also became important and new style of architecture such as “shoindukuri” and “tokonoma” was developed.

Finally, in Azuchi-momoyama era (16th century), “Wabicha” was perfected by Takeno Jouo and his disciple Sen no Rikyu. So long as one is in the tea house, the status would be denied and everyone was considered equal. Wabicha by Rikyu quickly prevailed among samurai warriors and merchants, and tea schools were set up by some feudal lords such as Enshu Kobori and Yuraku Oda.

2.2 The Azuchi-momoyama Era

2.2.1 Historical Background

At the end of Muromachi period, as the Onin war(応仁の乱) broke out in 1467, the whole society was in a chaos, and the Segnoku Period (wartime) began. During this time, individuals as strong military leaders appeared and among those were the most famous ones: おだ のぶなが(Oda Nobunaga), とよとみ ひでよし(Toyotomi Hideyoshi), and とくがわ いえやす(Tokugawa Ieyasu). The breakdown of the centralized shogunate resulted in looser restriction on the cultural development in society, and so provided suitable condition for the development and prevalence of the Japanese tea ceremony.

2.2.2 Societal Factors

Mentioned in the last paragraph, there were tons of wars happening everyday during the Azuchi-momoyama period. Samurai warriors are usually tired of having endless wars and need to worry about life and death all day. Participating in the tea ceremony relieves them from these kinds of pressure by letting them embrace a peaceful state of mind. Even it was temperate, this sort of relief is what samurai needed, and therefore the tea ceremony prevailed among the samurai warriors during that certain period.

Besides samurai warriors, merchants also played an important role in the development of the tea ceremony. Sakai, in Idzumi province, was in that day a flourishing port for foreign trade, and it was among its wealthy merchants the art of tea seems to have developed first. For them it was a form of recreation; as they were rich, they were owners of many fine pieces of earthenware, chiefly imported from Korea, China, and southern Asia, which they used in connection with the art of tea. Since advocating the tea ceremony could make their goods more popular and valuable, it's easy to deduce that they showed interests in tea ceremony partly for their economic benefits. And as the provincial daimyo became interested in this new practice, Sakai's merchants were in demand not only as traders but also as teachers of the tea ceremony. The new bond thus created between daimyo and merchants was also profitable to the former. Moreover, wealthy as they were, material weren't satiating them anymore, thus psychological enjoyment is what they were in pursuit for, and that's probably another reason for the prevalence of tea ceremony among merchant groups.

3. REFORM OF TEA CEREMONY

Though originated from China, the tea ceremony has developed its unique form in Japan and has become quite a symbol of the Japanese culture. Throughout the history of Japanese tea ceremony, there was one person who played a significant role in reforming the ritual, and even had huge influence on Japanese aesthetic views. This person's name was Sen no Rikyu.

3.1 Sen no Rikyu

Sen no Rikyu(1521-1591) was born the son of a merchant in the prosperous trading

center of Sakai, and this environment determined the course of his life. The merchants in Sakai patronized the Zen temples and entertained each other with the tea ceremony. Without doubt, they did this for the sake of their own interests-----the priests would link them to samurai (their customers for weapons and military supply), who were mostly appealed by the comforting effect of Zen. In such well-to-do environment, Sen no Rikyu was able to study both Zen and the tea ceremony from an early age. It appears that he developed his own individual style of the tea ceremony and achieved some standing as tea master in his home town. He was often invited by his seniors Imai Skyui and Tsuda Sokyua, and it is likely that these two men eventually introduced him to Nobunaga. However, after Hideyoshi beat the rebel forces and united the whole nation, Rikyu began to serve for Hideyoshi instead of Nobunaga. It was in his serving period that Rikyu reformed the tea ceremony and perfected the “Wabicha”.

3.2 The Reform and Development by Sen no Rikyu

Before Rikyu, two Zen monks of the Rinzaï sect, Murata Mokichi (Shuka) and Takeno Jouo had popularized the serving of tea in quiet and austere surroundings resembling a hermit's hut and had tried to infuse the spirituality of Zen into this simple gesture of hospitality. Rikyu inherited their ideologies and further perfected it from several aspects. He made improvements on the form of the tea ceremony (tea set, procedure, environment settings, architecture, etc.) and enriched the value within the tea ceremony(wabi, ichigo ichie, wa kei sei jaku, etc.).

3.2.1 Improvements on the form of the tea ceremony

Before Azuchi-momoyama period, tea ceremony was at a time an opportunity for those aristocrats to show off their possession and served as a socializing tool. Therefore, the tea sets, architecture of the tea house, the procedure of the tea ceremony are all related with the word “extravagant”. However, Rikyu concluded the secret of tea ceremony to be “how to make a cup of delicious tea with just water and tea.” To get the ceremony back to the most original and simple form, Rikyu made changes to the extravagant ones.

First is the Tea Set, or tools for the tea ceremony. Rikyu regarded the scrolling roll as the most important tool in a successful tea ceremony, since it can convey the spirit of the ceremony and lead both the host and the guest toward a certain state of mind. In the past, the calligraphy on the scroll was written by deceased Chinese monks, so the scrolls' quantity was limited. Rikyu, however, adopted calligraphy by lay Buddhist or even his Zen teacher, not only showing great respect to his teacher, but also revealing the close relationship between the tea ceremony and Zen. Despite the hanging scroll, Rikyu also made changes to the tea bowl. As mentioned in the background information, fancy bowl from China were transported to Japan and sold in the most flourishing port market. So before the reform, the tea bowl used in the ceremony were basically Jianzhan or Qingciwan from Tang/Song Dynasty. Yet Rikyu thinks the fancy bowl doesn't fit in with the spirit of “Wabicha”. He rather used the Cha sen(高麗茶碗), without any decoration on it, to show the natural beauty of the objects.

Second, he redesigned the architecture of the tea house to better reflect the doctrine of

tea ceremony. The garden outside the tea room, had its name “Roji” from Sen no Rikyu. He stipulated that the roji is only used for tea ceremony, so it can’t be used as a place for rest or play at any other time. Every landscape in the roji should have practical use, or it shouldn’t be set up. And as for the plants, no flowers, especially those with vivid color, would be allowed in Rikyu’s roji. He aimed to create a state as if one was surrounded by the mountains so that it could enjoy the whole ceremony without sophisticated concerns.

Third, he simplified a host of procedures in the ceremony to reach the ideal of “Wabicha”. Take Kaiseki as an example, it consists at most one soup and three dishes, which is a lot simpler than the traditional meal served at the ceremony. However, it emphasizes on using the natural food as ingredients, and the host must put its heart and soul into serving the guest. In this way, the guest and host can have inner bond with each other, and therefore reveals the psychological function of the tea ceremony.

3.2.2 The Values within the Tea Ceremony

The core value of Japanese tea ceremony is undoubtedly “Wabi”. Since the term itself means “without anything”, some people would regard it as a poor and negative situation. Even Takeno Jouo consider “wabi” to be a desolated state. However, Rikyu’s interpretation of “wabi” was positive and creative. If there was nothing existing, then there could be countless possibilities for things to create. Three viewpoints could then be drawn from his understanding of “wabi”:

- to be without sophisticated pursuit of money or fame
- to let nature take its course
- to have pure enjoyment with one’s heart (some call it surrealism)

Moreover, there are four doctrines (or spirits) concerning the tea ceremony proposed by Rikyu: わけいせいじゃ Wa Kei Sei Jaku. Wa means harmony, which advocates harmony in the form of the tea ceremony and people’s state of mind during the ritual. Kei means respect. The host need to respect the guest and vise versa. Also, the respect has nothing to do with one’s social status, so long as were in the tea room, all the host and guests are equal. Sei means clean, both externally and internally. Before the guests arrive, the host need to clean up the roji. Before entering the tea room, the guest needs to clean its hands and mouth. Throughout the ritual, the mind of all participants were cleared and purified. The last one, Jaku, mostly has the same meaning as Rikyu’s understanding of wabi, shows the unlimited creativity one can had with the mental state in the tea ceremony.

4. INTEGRATION INTO JAPANESE CULTURE

4.1 Localize Tea Ceremony

Sen no Rikyu changed people’s view that Tang earthenware is the most beautiful and valuable one by creating tea sets with Japanese identity. For instance, he had the bowl”

楽窯茶碗” being created and advocated to use it instead of the Chinese ones. He cut the bamboos by himself and created lots of handicrafts (spoons, flower receptacles etc.) utilized in the tea ceremony. All these things he made had their own feature distinguishable from Tang objects, which was later defined as Japanese identity. With all these tools and values incorporated into the ritual, tea ceremony gradually become a representative part of Japanese culture.

4.2 Prevalence among Citizens

It's said that citizens are the ones who shaped a country's culture, so the prevalence among citizens should be a crucial factor in making the tea ceremony integrated into Japanese culture.

Previously mentioned in the background information, the chaos by the war, the need of samurai and merchant classes all contributed to the prevalence of tea ceremony. Yet another important factor is Rikyu's political status. He was employed by two of the most famous shogun at that time, and was granted the title “Rikyu” by the Tendo. In 1586, Rikyu was given an opportunity to open up tea ceremony to thousands of people on a ritual held by Hideyoshi. The ritual served as an excellent propaganda for tea ceremony, as people got to know how the ceremony was performed and tended to follow the trend. However, unlike fashion, this trend of performing tea ceremony has lasted much longer. Its longevity should be attributed to the values within the tea ceremony: it was with these values that Japanese were able to form their unique perspectives and discipline, and was with these values that Japanese culture could be distinguished from others. The role these values played conversely made themselves deeply rooted in Japanese identity and had thus been passed from one generation to another. Performing the tea ceremony is a way for the Japanese to actualize these values and so was it embraced by most.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Under the influence of Sen no Rikyu, Japanese tea art had great reform and reached its pinnacle during the Azuchi-momoyama period. “Wabi”, as the core value of Japanese tea ceremony, revealed the relationship between Zen and tea art, while also lay the basis of Japanese aesthetic view of minimalism. Historical background, societal factors and political influences all contributed to the process of tea ceremony being a unique part of Japanese culture. Rooted in Japanese culture, the strong sense of ritual formulated by Sen no Rikyu in the course of tea ceremony shows the care and love people had for each other, as well as the equality and respectfulness between people. And this could still be seen in behaviors and personalities of Japanese people, which gained much praise and respect for themselves.

In conclusion, people formed the culture of a country (though influenced by historical and societal factors), and the culture would have its impact back on the people who created it. Following a circle, with new cultures springing up and traditional ones remaining their glamour, that's how we humans step forward.

REFERENCES

- [1]. Beatrice M. Bodart, (1977). "Tea and Counsel, The Political Role of Sen Rikyu", Sophia University. *Monumenta Nipponica*, 32(1) (Spring, 1977), pp.49-74
- [2]. Daisetz T. Suzuki, (nd) "*Zen and Japanese Culture*", Princeton University Press, Chapter Title "Rikyū and Other Teamen".
- [3]. Dornne Kondo, (1985). "*The Way of Tea: A Symbolic Analysis*" *Man, New Series*, 20(2) (Jun., 1985), pp.289-294
- [4]. Jun Teng, (1992). "*The Outline of Japanese ceremony culture*". Dongfang Press, p.7, p.301
- [5]. Okakura Kakuzo, (2000). *The book of tea*, Boston. MA: Tuttle Publishing, p.74
- [6]. Ruixuan Lin, (1991). "*Origin of Japanese Tea Ceremony: Southern Record*". Taipei Luyu Tea Art Company, p.253
- [7]. Sen Soshitsu, (1998). *The Japanese way of tea: from its origins in China to Sen Rikyu*. Honolulu: university of Hawaii Press, 1998, p.187
- [8]. Sokei Nanbo, (1986). "*Southern Record*", [南坊宗啓(なんぼう そうけい), "南方録",] Iwanami Shoten, 1986, p.75
- [9]. Theodore M. Ludwig, (1974). "The way of tea: a religio-aesthetic mode of life", The University of Chicago Press, 14(1) (Aug. 1974), pp.28-50
- [10]. Theodore M. Ludwig, (1981). "Before Rikyū. Religious and Aesthetic Influences in the Early History of the Tea Ceremony", Sophia University, *Monumenta Nipponica*, 36(4) (Winter, 1981), pp.367-390
- [11]. Zongshi Qian, (1992). "Chajing's Historical Significance to Japanese Tea Ceremony". Nankai University Press, p.177