

Analysis of the Aesthetics of Japanese Tea Ceremony

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Abstract: Tea culture originated in China. It was introduced to Japan through international exchanges and communication, forming an aesthetic culture with Japanese national characteristics. The Japanese tea ceremony is the art of drinking tea and a comprehensive cultural form that integrates various artistic elements. Zen Buddhism profoundly influences the Japanese tea ceremony. No matter its origin, unique aesthetic characteristics, or even the spirit of the tea ceremony, all of them have an inseparable connection with Zen. This article will combine the history of the Japanese tea ceremony, introduce the integration of Zen tea culture, classify and explore the triple realm beauty of the Japanese tea ceremony, and attempt to analyze the aesthetic thoughts of Sen no Rikyū.

Keywords: Japanese Tea Ceremony; Aesthetics; Zen

Published: Sept 04, 2024

Introduction

Tea culture originated in China. It was introduced to Japan through international exchanges and communication, forming an aesthetic culture with Japanese national characteristics. In "The Book Of Tea," the founder of modern Japanese art, Tenxin Okakura, describes the Japanese tea ceremony as an aesthetic religion, a secret technique that brings humanity beauty, harmony, and joy. The Japanese tea ceremony is the art of drinking tea and a comprehensive cultural form that integrates various artistic elements, attracting the attention of many scholars and artists.

Several historical materials discuss the aesthetics of the Japanese tea ceremony, primarily based on Zen philosophy, and examine its influence on its various aesthetic characteristics. Li Ruli (2017) put forward her viewpoints from the perspectives of the influence of the Chinese Zen philosophy of "no written words" on Japanese tea set design, the influence of "learning from nature" on the architectural texture of Japanese teahouses, and the influence of "seeing the mind and seeing the nature" on the culture of the Japanese tea ceremony, such as "Ichigo Ichie" and "sitting alone." In the research on the distinctiveness of the Japanese tea ceremony, Shen Wen (2016) pointed out that the incorporation of Zen culture into the Japanese tea ceremony is most prominently demonstrated through its intricate and elaborate protocols, which refine the mental faculties of tea enthusiasts. One can genuinely grasp tea culture's profound significance by revealing its intrinsic essence. Cai Dongfeng (2019) believes that the Japanese tea ceremony spirit of "harmony, respect, clarity, and tranquility" is consistent with the aesthetic spirit of "emptiness, enlightenment, and environment" embodied in Zen aesthetics. The highest aesthetic realm achieved by Zen Buddhism in enlightenment is the cold and desolate state of loneliness, emptiness, and uncontamination. The aesthetic pursuit of "tranquility" in tea ceremony art embodies the aesthetic conception of Zen Buddhism. Wang Ruoxian (1991) also believes that the "tranquility" of "harmony, respect, purity, and tranquility" is based on "harmony, respect, and purity," and its artistic tone of dryness, tranquility, and ethereal beauty promotes aesthetic enjoyment of tea tasting to a

transcendent nirvana consciousness similar to Zen Buddhism. Sasaki Takashi (2014) emphasized that the essential reason why the tea ceremony is not just a simple fun and entertainment activity is that it strictly practices the spirit of Zen Buddhism. Zen Buddhism profoundly influences the Japanese tea ceremony. No matter its origin, unique aesthetic characteristics, or even the spirit of the tea ceremony, all of them have an inseparable connection with Zen.

However, among numerous references, very few articles classify and analyze the aesthetics of the Japanese tea ceremony. Therefore, this article will combine the history of the Japanese tea ceremony, introduce the integration of Zen tea culture, classify and explore the triple realm beauty of the Japanese tea ceremony, and attempt to analyze the aesthetic thoughts of Sen no Rikyū.

1. Overview of the History of Japanese Tea Ceremony

The Japanese tea ceremony originated in the Nara period and was introduced by Japanese Zen monks from China. According to records, in 645 AD, Japan underwent the "Great Reform" and began a wave of absorbing and learning Tang culture. Many Tang envoys, including many monks, were sent to China. It is generally believed in the academic community that the Tang Dynasty tea culture was first spread to Japan by a Japanese monk named Saichō. In 804 AD, Saichō and his disciples studied Esoteric Buddhism at Guoqing Temple in Tiantai Mountain, China, while also learning about the tea-drinking culture. After finishing their studies, he returned to Japan and brought back more than 400 volumes of various scriptures, such as the Lotus Sutra and the Diamond Sutra. He also brought back some tea seeds to plant, known as the "Nikki Tea Garden," which was the earliest tea garden in Japan. He also introduced tea-drinking culture into Buddhist temples and upper-class society, opening up the history of tea culture in Japan[7].

In the Kamakura period of Japan, when China was in the Song Dynasty, the Japanese monk Eisai entered the Song Dynasty multiple times to study Zen and tea art. After returning to Japan, he wrote the first tea book in Japan, "Drinking Tea for Health," laying a theoretical foundation for the formation of the Japanese tea ceremony. Therefore, Eisai is also known as the "Tea Ancestor" in Japan. With the further promotion of tea-drinking culture in Japan, tea drinking became a Buddhist ritual in temples and quickly spread to the people, setting off a trend of tea drinking in the whole society. Subsequently, the tea ceremony gradually began its localization development in Japan. Murata Jukō is a famous Zen master in Japan and is also known as the founder of the Japanese tea ceremony. He obtained the Chinese Zen monk Yuanwu Keqin's ink treasure "Oneness Of Dhyana And Tea" from his master, Master Ikkyū Sōjun, and integrated the tea ceremony with Zen Buddhism, creating a simple and natural style named Souan tea. Sojun believes that the tea ceremony's essence lies in the heart's purification. He transformed the tea ceremony from "enjoyment" to "abstinence"[8], reflecting the core of the Zen philosophy - self-cultivation. After Murata Jukō, Takeno Jōō inherited the tea style of Jukō and founded the "Wabicha" style. He defined "wabi" as integrity, moderation, and non-extravagance[9] and deeply integrated this simple and beautiful concept into the tea ceremony. Afterward, the master of the Japanese tea ceremony, Sen no Rikyū, devoted himself to eliminating the entertainment value of the tea ceremony, further reducing the tea room area to about 4.5 square meters, using extremely simple tea utensils, and summarizing the spirit of tea ceremony with "harmony, respect, purity, and tranquility." He carried out a thorough aesthetic revolution of the Japanese tea ceremony and derived it into a way of practicing Zen, understanding Buddhism through tea ceremony practice, and achieving enlightenment.

2. The Triple Realm Beauty of Japanese Tea Ceremony

In this way, the aesthetic analysis of the tea ceremony cannot be separated from the interpretation of Zen aesthetics. The author believes that overall, the aesthetics of the Japanese tea ceremony can be divided into three parts: tangible beauty, artistic conception beauty, and abstract beauty.

2.1 The Tangible Beauty of the Tea Ceremony

After Sen no Rikyū, the aesthetic of the Japanese tea ceremony was established. "Rikyū aesthetics" has always been regarded as the standard of beauty by Japanese people and has been passed down to this day. From the design of the house architecture, tea sets, and ceremony, we can feel the tangible beauty of the tea ceremony.

The tea room building has two main parts: the courtyard and the tea room. The tea courtyard includes the tea room. The Souan tea room is known as the "roji(ろじ)" and serves as a passage leading to the tea room. Generally, evergreen plants are planted in the courtyard, and bright flowers are not allowed. The ground is paved with stones called "flying stones" as a walking path, which vary in size and shape.

The architectural style of the tea room is simple and natural, repaired with materials such as soil, sand, wood, bamboo, and wheat straw, without any decoration added to the exterior. Okakura Tenshin calls it the result of imitating a Zen temple. Japanese tea rooms also pursue asymmetrical beauty. The ceiling of the tea room should be composed of at least three styles, and the pillars of the niche should be made of different materials from other pillars in the tea room. The design of the windows also emphasizes the staggered height and varying sizes. The tea room is usually four and a half stack¹, about 7.29 square meters, and can only accommodate three to five guests, avoiding symmetry inside and outside. The entrance to the tea room is a small door that is less than 80cm long and less than 50cm wide, and guests must kneel to enter. There are no decorations in the tea room except for the stove on the ground, the iron pot on the stove, charcoal tongs, a simple calligraphy or painting, and a vase with seasonal flowers[10].

In tea set selection, a preference for simplicity and unadorned is advocated. Tea bowls featuring informal shapes, understated colors, unpolished surfaces, and uneven glazes are frequently encountered. For instance, the "Raku tea Bowl," crafted by Sen no Rikyū and collected by Omotesenke², is marked by its rustic robustness and monochromatic palette. Oribe ware³, renowned for its "irregular shapes," typically features geometric patterns with diverse slants. The tea room architecture and the design of tea sets in the Japanese tea ceremony embody a unique aesthetic characterized by simplicity, asymmetry, and imperfections, offering viewers a unique visual experience.

The tea-tasting process is full of a strong sense of ritual. Once the guests are seated, the tea master follows the prescribed steps to kindle the charcoal fire, boil water, and prepare the tea, subsequently serving it to the guests. According to regulations, guests must receive tea with both hands respectfully. After expressing gratitude, guests need to savor the tea three times. After drinking, according to tradition, guests should appreciate and compliment the various tea sets. Finally, the guests knelt to bid farewell to the host, and the host would warmly saw them off. The entire ceremony can last up to 4 hours or as little as 1 hour.

¹ When Japanese people describe the size of a room, they use the word "stack," which refers to the number of tatami mats that can be accommodated when laid flat.

² Omotesenke: one of the schools of Japanese tea ceremony. Along with Urasenke and Mushakōjisenke, it is one of the three lines of the Sen family descending from Sen no Rikyū, which together are known as the san-Senke or "three Sen houses/families"

³ Oribe ware: It was named after the support of Furuta Oribe, a disciple of Sen no Rikyū. Furuta Oribe was the most famous tea master after Sen no Rikyū

The standardized rituals and the meticulous etiquette between hosts and guests offer each other a delightful aesthetic experience.

The tea ceremony often begins and ends in silence. From tea masters to tea drinkers, tea sets to tea courtyards, all aim for tranquility, to contemplate, relax, and forget in peace. There is no splendor, only simplicity and elegance. In the depths of tranquility, nature, lightness, and stability are revealed, as calm as sitting in meditation, and one can appreciate the beauty around them while sipping tea.

2.2 The Artistic Conception Beauty of the Tea Ceremony

The aesthetic conception of the tea ceremony primarily includes "Tranquility" and "Nothingness." "Tranquility" means "leisurely quietness" and "simplicity." The humble tea room, unsophisticated tea bowls, and quiet tea yard reveal calm and peace. Time passes in silence. The host and guest coexist harmoniously and politely, savoring the richness of tea soup and thinking of the joys and sorrows of life. Amid the silent gazes, people can feel tacit understanding and respect from each other.

At the tea party, the rough and rudimentary tea room and the simple and unadorned tea utensils also exuded the beauty of nature without carving. Watching the host skillfully and attentively brew tea for the guests, guests can set aside all distractions. For the host, brewing tea is also about eliminating distractions and focusing on the present moment. This kind of concentration on both guests and host can awaken inner peace and tranquility, from "Egolessness" to "mindlessness", and then reach a state of "Ānimitta" in Zen, achieving great ease. Hisamatsu Shinichi pointed out that "nothingness" is the creative source of Japanese tea ceremony culture[11]. Nothing is everything, and nothingness makes everything possible.

In Zen Buddhism, "Tranquility" is a free translation of "nirvana" and refers to the state of complete silence where all things in the world are entirely extinguished[12]. We can also understand it as the spiritual realm of "nothing originally exists." Therefore, "Tranquility" and "Nothingness" are interconnected. Through the tea ceremony, the body and mind stay calm and undisturbed by everything. With a serene tea heart, one can cope with the ever-changing world.

2.3 The Abstrac Beauty of Tea Ceremony

Japanese artist Yanagi Mumeyoshi said that "tea" is a beautiful religion. Only by entering the realm of religion can tea become a "tea ceremony." Practice aesthetic appreciation in the tea ceremony, avoid evil thoughts and distractions, and appreciate harmony and tranquility. Thus, one could be getting close to feeling two beautiful states: "Oneness Of Dhyana And Tea" and "Ichigo Ichie."

The core meaning of "Zen" in Zen Buddhism lies in "contemplation," emphasizing the realization of the essence of life and the truth of the universe through inner peace and deep thought. Zen practitioners choose high mountains and deep forests far from the hustle and bustle as their place of practice. This choice of environment is not only for external isolation but also for the purification and concentration of the inner soul. Monks gradually cultivate a spiritual pursuit that transcends the material world through daily self-sufficient living, a pure and ascetic attitude, and regular practice and reflection. The Japanese tea ceremony drew inspiration from the ideas of Zen Buddhism. In the tranquility of the tea room, participants concentrate wholeheartedly on the present moment, reflecting on themselves and pursuing inner peace through a series of rituals, which coincides with the self-awakening pursued by Zen Buddhism. Therefore, the tea ceremony is an art of drinking tea and a way

of spiritual cultivation. "Oneness Of Dhyana And Tea" refers to the spiritual integration and communication between Zen and tea.

If we trace back the meanings of "Ichigo" and "Ichie," we will find that "Ichigo" is a Buddhist term referring to the period from birth to death [13], while "Ichie" refers to gathering together for religious purposes [14]. Both terms are full of Buddhist connotations. Buddhism believes that everything constantly changes and that no eternal existence exists. Diamond Sutra said, "All phenomena are like a dream, an illusion, a bubble, and a shadow, Like dew and lightning. Thus should you meditate on them". The world is unpredictable; people are like mayflies born between heaven and earth. Every gathering is limited, so it needs to be cherished even more. "Ichigo Ichie" is a practice of this philosophical thought. The phrase "Ichigo Ichie" first appeared in the book "The Record of Soji YAMANOUE" and was later quoted by a famous tea person named Ii Naosuke. He wrote in his collection "Chanoyu Ichie Shu": "We should keep in mind that an encounter only experiences once, so the host should pay attention to every single matter, and guests should never neglect the host's care; both should communicate earnestly. Therefore, the tea ceremony advocates that both the host and the guest should cherish the beauty of meeting in the present moment.

3. "Rikyū aesthetics"

Sen no Rikyū is the culmination of the Japanese tea ceremony. He is not only a highly creative artist but also a devout practitioner of Zen Buddhism. He revolutionized the tea-drinking customs introduced from China to Japan through his practice and understanding. He abandoned luxurious tea sets and complicated rituals, emphasizing the simplicity and nature of tea rooms and the harmony and respect among participants in tea parties. Drinking tea as an external pleasure activity has transformed into an internal spiritual practice.

Sen no Rikyū's inheritance and development of the tea ceremony cannot be separated from the influence of Zen Buddhism. Throughout his life, he practiced the aesthetic concept of "wabi-sabi" and thoroughly integrated "wabi tea" into the "Sōan tea style." Later generations respectfully referred to his style as the "Rikyū tea ceremony." The "Rikyū Tea Ceremony" emphasizes avoiding luxury and material pleasures, respecting the purity and immaculate of the spiritual world. Ultimately, he sacrificed himself with an indomitable spirit and elevated his tea ceremony philosophy to the greatest extent possible.

The creativity of the "Rikyū Tea Ceremony" is mainly reflected in the design of the tea room architecture, roji, and tea sets, as well as the spirit and rules of the tea ceremony. The essence of "Rikyū aesthetics" is that investing a great deal of time and effort makes ordinary materials supreme, that beauty comes from daily objects, and that beauty occurs unnoticeably. The "Taian Teahouse" built by Rikyū is smaller than the original four and a half stacks, with an area reduced to two stacks. In his later years, he even attempted to build a one-and-a-half-stack tea room. The reason for holding tea ceremonies in such a tiny area was that, together with the minimal decoration in the house, the actions of the host and guest make the space tenser and, in turn, increase the solemnity of the ceremony and also manage to reduce the social and psychological distance between guests and hosts.

According to "Nanbo Roku 4," "roji," the passage leading to the tea room,

⁴ Nanboroku (also pronounced "Nanporoku") is an old book which has been handed down in the Tachibana clan in Hakata (a part of Fukuoka City, Fukuoka Prefecture), as a book of SEN no Rikyū's secret teachings.

is the place for guests to rid themselves of their desires and wills in anticipation of the pure experiences of tea. As for the tea utensils, choose the most simple and unadorned tea bowl, which never has a complete circle, uniform thickness, or smooth texture. These subtle irregularities make the guests more focused on the cup during the tea proceedings[15]. He established "harmony, respect, purity, and tranquility" as the spirit of the tea ceremony, advocating for harmonious coexistence, mutual respect, and equality between guests and hosts and improving character through self-reflection in a peaceful and relaxed environment. At the same time, by establishing standardized tea ceremony regulations, people can experience the spiritual connotations advocated by tea ceremonies with a solemn and dedicated mood in the tea party. However, Sen no Rikyū said, "The tea ceremony is the simple act of boiling water, making tea, and drinking it." "The meaning of tea is in the joy of feeling life. A flower enjoys life, even if it blooms for only one day. The main beauty is the radiance of blossoming life". Rikyū's tea house has a simple latticed window, walls of rough clay, and a simple vase with a single flower. From the "Rikyū Tea Ceremony," I read out the personality of this tea master who treats himself and others with unadorned true colors and the most sincere heart. Rikyū showed us how to make a drink and find peace in simplicity and elegance in modesty.

In his book "The Six Hundred Years of Tea Ceremony," Tadachika Kuwata critically pointed out that after Rikyū, people forgot the most fundamental spirit of the Japanese tea ceremony, and the tea ceremony also degenerated into a formal tea event or tea party exclusively for others to enjoy. With the modernization of society, the tea ceremony has become more professional and entertaining, which inevitably lacks charm. How to inherit and promote the charm of the Japanese tea ceremony has become an essential issue for tea lovers nowadays.

However, looking back at the aesthetic thoughts presented to the world by the Japanese tea ceremony, such as "wabi-sabi aesthetics," "Oneness Of Dhyana And Tea," and "Ichigo Ichie," it is not difficult to find that these simple and pure elements exist in our daily lives. The significance of the tea ceremony is that it reminds people to perceive and create beauty in the trivialities and imperfections of daily life.

Therefore, the general public attracted by the traditional spirit and aesthetics of the Japanese tea ceremony can consider trying to find aesthetic resonance through Japanese tea ceremony, and based on understanding the spirit of tea ceremony, find a suitable way to achieve spiritual sustenance, facing the world and themselves with a peaceful heart and exploring inner self in daily life, cultivating moral character, and embracing the Beauty of Simplicity.

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