

Chanoyu: A Traditional Japanese Tea Ceremony

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Abstract

The Japanese tea ceremony is a Japanese cultural activity involving the ceremonial preparation of Matcha tea. This article traces the history, the evolution of this ancient practice. It also discusses the aesthetics of this ceremony, the actual making of it, the accessories required for it, and finally the sublime experience the guests enjoy.

Keywords

Chanoyu, matcha tea, Zen Buddhism, tea master, kama, tea caddy, bamboo ladle

Introduction

One of Japan's most distinguished cultural institutions is the practice of Chanoyu, a ceremonial serving of tea that honors beauty in everyday life.

In tracing its history, we find that the powdered green 'matcha' tea, now a central aspect of the ceremony, did not arrive in Japan until 1191. It was originally brought from China during the Song dynasty by the monk Myoan Eisai, who is also credited with establishing the Rinzaï school of Zen Buddhism in Japan. Tea seeds were thereupon planted in three locations, including at Uji near Kyoto, which later on became a world-renowned center for tea production.

In the subsequent centuries, both Zen and tea-ceremonies proliferated Japanese culture and lifestyle. By the second half of the 16th century, the ceremony had become a social event of high prestige, wherein the rich would showcase their wealth through hospitality.

Hideyoshi, the de facto leader of Japan at the time, was known to have constructed an all-gold tea house that he filled up with exquisite paraphernalia mainly imported from China. He also had an exclusive 'tea-master' to oversee his extravagant ceremonies. However, this tea-master, named Rikyu, eventually played an important role in bringing subtlety to the ostentatious ceremonies by directing focus towards senses and the human connect. He scaled down the physical space of the tea-room to less than half of the then traditional size. He also reduced ambient light by making windows smaller for the guests to have a heightened sense of experience. The hosts and guests were positioned in close proximity, so as to be able to hear each other breathe. Ornate and expensive *celadon* vases were replaced with bamboo flower containers as props, and lavish Chinese tea-drinking bowls were replaced by more humble indigenous clay varieties. Bamboo tea scoops were used in place of ivory, and ordinary well buckets replaced opulent crafted bronze water containers.

A multitude of specialized tools and equipment is required for Chanoyu tea making. The hosts usually bring all utensils at the beginning of the ceremony and remove them at the end. The ritual commences with the symbolic cleansing of utensils using a traditional *Fukusa* cloth. Hot water is prepared in a *Kama*, or a cast iron tea kettle, over charcoal fire. The attendees use a *Kaishu* paper for cleaning their hands before indulging in tea-sweets that are distributed while the tea is being made. The tea caddy *Usuki* holds the thin matcha powder, while hot water is poured into a *Chawan* drinking bowl from the *Kama* using a

Hishaku bamboo ladle. The matcha is whisked using a traditional bamboo whisk called a *Chasen*, which is chosen as per the type of matcha being used.



Image 1: The Tea Ceremony-A host rests a bamboo ladle on an iron pot

There are many interesting idiosyncratic aspects to the ceremony. The table napkins are left unfolded as a way of expressing modesty. Guests are required to remove their shoes before entering, and the hosts provide slippers for indoor use. The hosts and the guests then give each other silent bows, after which the guests ritually purify themselves in a stone basin and rinse their mouth with water. As a matter of etiquette, the guests are seated by the hosts in an order of prestige, and only eat what the hosts provide.

Soup is usually served before the ceremony and is complimented with *Sake* or rice wine. After the meal, the guests are required to leave the room, upon which the host sweeps the floor, decorates the space with flowers, and prepares the scene for making tea. Upon being summoned back in, the guests once more go through the purification and acknowledgement formalities. The first guest is served a bowl of ‘thick’ tea, which is to be sipped and passed on to the next guest after wiping the brim, until everyone has had a sip from the same bowl. It ends with a bowl of ‘thin’ tea. At the end of the ceremony, the guests compliment the host for a good presentation and a memorable experience.

The Chanoyu tea ceremony represents harmony, respect, purity, and tranquility. The various movements comprising the tea-making ritual are performative, slow, and precise. The women attend the ceremony in a simple and undecorated kimono, while the men wear a Hakama. White split socks are worn by both men and women, and are taken off before heading to the tea room. A formal Chanoyu ceremony lasts for four hours, and accommodates subtle differences based on seasons.

To observe this age-old practice is indeed a sensorial treat, and it represents the best of Japanese and Asian cultural heritage that continues to have modern-day resonance.

Reference

Image 1: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Japanese_tea_ceremony

