

The Japanese Way of Tea

From Its Origins in China to Sen Rikyū

By Sen Sōshitsu
Translated by V. Dixon Morris

HONOLULU: UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII PRESS, 1998
XXVII + 229 PAGES

The present-day tradition of the Japanese tea ceremony (*chanoyu*) takes Sen Rikyū (1522–91) as its founder. The author of this specialized history is the current master in one of three lineages of *chanoyu* schools that trace their origins back more than four hundred years to Sen Rikyū. The present Sen Sōshitsu (b. 1923) is the fifteenth descendent in the Urasenke branch. The Urasenke tradition is the most prominent in Japan and has actively promoted itself overseas. Sōshitsu XV, among his various activities promoting the Way of Tea (*chadō* or *sadō*), has taught on a visiting basis in the Department of History at the University of Hawaii for many years. This book provides, in scholarly garb, his teachings about the art of tea.

V. Dixon Morris labored long and successfully to put Sen Sōshitsu XV's work into a form associated with specialist historical monographs, and Professor Paul Varley adds an enlightening forward. The text itself is dense and involves usage of a great many Japanese terms, including a key aesthetic category *wabi*, meaning "wretched" or "lonely" and implying an unadorned, quiet taste. There are also references to a great many Chinese and Japanese persons, texts and locations. As a consequence, the volume is much too specialized for most readers.

The time period covered by the text runs from the eighth through the sixteenth centuries. Since it ends with Sen Rikyū and his Zen Buddhist-derived pursuit of refined simplicity, it falls far short of a guide to the tea ceremony in present-day Japan. Frankly, for an understanding of the tea ceremony as it fits into current Japanese life, there are many better sources. Libraries and bookstores usually have Okakura Kazuo's *The Book of Tea* (1906; reprinted 1956 and still in print) and A. L. Sadler's *Cha-no-yu, The Japanese Tea Ceremony* (1933; reprinted in 1963 and still in print), both of which are authoritative and more accessible to students. An electronic version of Okakura's book can be found on the Tea Time Web pages (<http://www.teatime.com>).

Sen Sōshitsu XV himself has published two popular books, *Chadō: The Way of Tea* (Weatherhill, 1979) and *Tea Life, Tea Mind* (Weatherhill, 1979). In the reference section of libraries V. Dixon Morris, the translator of the volume under review, has provided a short but greatly enlightening entry on the Japanese tea

ceremony in the *Encyclopedia of Asian History* (Scribners, 1988, vol. IV, p. 80), and Allan Palmer presents another more extensive account of the stages of the ceremony itself in the *Kodansha Encyclopedia of Japan* (Tokyo, 1983, vol. 7, pp. 360–65). There are also quite a few Web sites with information on the Japanese tea ceremony. The best, "Chadō: The Way of Tea" (<http://www.art.uiuc.edu/japanhouse/tea/>) is the work of Professor Kimiko Gunji of the School of Art and Design at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and represents the Urasenke tradition.

Finally, it is usually possible in most places these days to find a person who has studied the Japanese tea ceremony and is willing to provide a demonstration. A live presentation is the best introduction, since essence of the art lies in its performance. Few aspects of Japanese culture make such an obvious impression as does a *chanoyu* ceremonial performance in almost any setting.

Nevertheless, this highly insightful book reveals Sōshitsu XV's deep understanding of the history of tea in China and Japan, as well as a theory of cultural adaptation. In discussions of cultural transmission, Sōshitsu XV writes about the origins of the tradition in which he has lived, but his approach also must be read as a guide for the tea ceremony in a changing world.

In regard to Sen Rikyū and the wabi tradition, Sōshitsu XV puts forward three main assertions: first, that the tea ceremony, and by extension any cultural tradition, carries some peculiar but inescapable elements from its origins. For example, from Lu Yu in the eighth century through Sen Rikyū in the sixteenth and down to the present, practitioners have shown a fascination with the nature and style of the utensils used in the tea ceremony. Still, although the utensils have changed greatly, present-day Japanese tea ceremony emphasizes the special wabi character of the utensils and setting. Secondly, he asserts that successful cultural adaptation occurs when highly creative individuals infuse these established practices with a new aesthetic. This is best represented by the wabi tradition itself in which the austere aesthetics of a Zen tradition of tea consumption replaced the ostentatious taste for grand tea ceremonies in sixteenth-century Japan. Finally, Sōshitsu XV suggests that continuing transformations are necessary to keep any tradition alive. Without ever discussing the changes in the tea ceremony over the past one hundred and thirty years, he is implying it was proper to transform the Way of Tea into its present-day form in Japan where it is taught primarily as a ceremony emphasizing the civilizing role of women. He concludes, "Indeed, the single most essential task for the Way of Tea in the future will be to find approaches that are ever fresh but still firmly rooted in tradition" (188). Thus, in spite of the many insights about the history of tea in this book, I would recommend it most as a source for understanding the Japanese approach to cultural adaptation. ■

DAVID D. BUCK is Professor of History specializing in Modern China and Director of the Institute of World Affairs at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. He has a long-term interest in the history of tea in Asia and Europe.