



What Is Teachable about Japanese Tea Practice?

By Melinda Landeck

Left: A peddler selling tea extracts. Right: An open tea house serving *matcha* (green tea). Copies of paintings from *Poetry Competition of Artisans*, vol. 2 from a set of three volumes. Copied by Kanō Osanobu and Kanō Masanobu in 1846. The original work, which was also copied, was made in 1632. Source: <http://tiny.cc/psq0uw>.

The Japanese art known as the “way of tea” (*chadō* or *chanoyū*—often translated into English as the slightly misleading “tea ceremony”) is the highly stylized and artistically nuanced preparation of *matcha* (powdered green tea), often in a tearoom or freestanding structure specifically designed for that purpose.¹ While the consumption of tea in Japan began as a largely aristocratic activity during the twelfth century, by the sixteenth century, tea drinking had matured into a highly codified and multifaceted art form practiced by warrior elites, wealthy merchants, and Buddhist clerics.

Thanks to trends such as the current health-driven “tea boom” in North American food culture, the subsequent introduction of matcha-based products at major chains like Whole Foods and Starbucks, and even the cinematic depiction of *chadō* in films such as 2003’s *The Last Samurai*, interest in tea as one lens through which to teach about Japanese culture and history in the classroom is growing measurably both among educators and prospective students. Varied responses to this trend from the tea world over the past decade include publication of a multi-lesson curriculum unit, *Tea and the Japanese Way of Chanoyu* (2005), targeted at the secondary classroom, the translation of a number of Japanese technical tea manuals into English, and the emergence of a number of

American university courses designed around the history and cultural significance of the art.

These developments seem natural given the adaptability of *chadō* as an instructional framework. The trappings and spatial context of tea practice present a virtual microcosm of traditional Japanese culture. Often held in a tearoom or teahouse specifically designed for the needs of the art, tea gatherings function as operative showcases for Japanese craftsmanship, including ceramics (tea bowls), woodworking (tea scoops and water ladles), architecture (the tearoom itself), garden design, traditional cuisine, calligraphy (on hanging scrolls used as decoration), and flower arrangement. Tearoom décor is intentional and allusive in nature. The host, who orchestrates all the materials used for the gatherings, selects items that may evoke prominent figures or events drawn from tea history, and/or high-light design motifs appropriate to the season of the year, the nature of the gathering, and the personalities of its invited participants.

From a sociological standpoint, tea gatherings (both the brief *chakai* or the longer *chaji*) are also designed principally as opportunities for politely formulaic and culturally determined modes of social exchange. Tearoom etiquette, therefore, provides an excellent basis for the study of Japanese social relationships and traditional etiquette.

Practical Challenges

While the experiential nature of the way of tea makes it an appealing case study in Japanese culture and history, it also presents teachers with challenges in incorporating material on chadō. In lieu of experienced local tea practitioners willing to make classroom visits and/or regional tearooms accessible to students, live demonstrations of tea procedure are impractical for most educators to arrange. While actual demonstrations with trained practitioners are a wonderful way to expose students to chadō, they do not represent the only means to explore effectively this rich tradition in the classroom. The social history of tea, its rich textual legacy, multilayered cultural resonances, and vibrant material culture all offer educators alternate approaches to implementing a lesson or even an extended unit on chadō. The following sections will briefly explore alternate means for incorporating material on the way of tea into the humanities classroom.

Social History of Tea

The history of chadō in Japan is a long one. The Zen monk Myōan Eisai (1141–1215) is credited with introducing tea cultivation to Japan during the early medieval period, bringing seeds and reports of Song dynasty-era tea consumption back with him after an extended stay in China. Throughout the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries, the consumption of tea was largely limited to social elites, including shoguns and court nobility, and took place primarily in elaborately decorated formal reception rooms called *shoin*.

As the popularity of tea continued to spread into other social classes, the style of tea that came to be known as chadō developed as a simplified procedure in which a host, sometimes with the assistance of a helper, would prepare tea in front of a handful of guests in a more constrained and intimate space in a style called *sōan*, or “grass hut,” tea. Unlike the emphasis on Chinese-made utensils, called *karamono*, at the larger *shoin* tea gatherings, *sōan* style tea practice began to incorporate many items of domestic manufacture. Early proponents of this style included the Buddhist priest Murata Shukō (1423–1502) and the merchant Takeno Jo-ō (1502–1555). Following in their footsteps, a fellow Sakai merchant named Sen Rikyū (1522–1591) would emerge as a major figure in tea history—eventually serving both Oda Nobunaga and Toyotomi Hideyoshi, Japan’s two unifying hegemonies, as a tea master. In this capacity, Rikyū not only gained prominence and wealth but also enjoyed significant political power.

Among the many disciples who sought him out as an instructor in the way of tea were powerful regional lords (*daimyō*) such as Hosokawa Tadaoki (also known as Sansai, 1564–1646), Gamō Ujisato (1556–1595), and Furuta Oribe (1543–1615). The careers of all of these powerful men, and their relationship to Rikyū, has been the topic of some of the English-language scholarship

CHANOYU TEACHING RESOURCES**Classroom Materials**

The SPICE program at Stanford has produced a comprehensive, multi-lesson unit on Japanese tea ceremony, including a DVD recording of a tea gathering in a traditional setting. Selena Lai and Karen Tiegel, *Tea and the Japanese Tradition of Chanoyu*. Stanford, CA: Stanford Program on International and Cross-Cultural Education (SPICE), 2005, <http://spice.stanford.edu/>.

A free online curriculum unit produced for the Fowler Museum’s “Steeped in History: The Art of Tea” exhibit offers a lesson plan on Japanese tea ceremony, *renga* (linked poetry) and the notion of tranquility associated with tea practice, <http://bit.ly/UffuQ7>.

The Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs has prepared a printable fact sheet with useful information about the tea ceremony, including a historical overview of the art and some of its major figures, and a graphic guide to commonly used utensils, <http://bit.ly/ZhWey>.

Video

The Asian Art Museum of San Francisco also has a useful online video about the construction of the traditional tearoom that is a permanent fixture of their Japanese collection, <http://bit.ly/YXIeeU>.

The 1989 film *Rikyū* depicts the latter part of the life of Sen no Rikyū (1522–1591), one of Japan’s best-known tea masters. This film is available on Netflix and through suppliers such as Amazon. *Rikyū*. Hiroshi Teshigahara, Dir. Shōchiku, 1989.

Dream Window, an excellent 1992 Smithsonian video on Japan gardens, includes a nice segment on the tea ceremony. The video has long been out of print, but there is a version on YouTube (in three parts, the portion on the tea ceremony appears at the five-minute mark in part two), <http://bit.ly/YrDBrj>.

Visual Arts

A photo gallery of famous Japanese tearooms can be explored online, <http://japanese-tea-ceremony.net/teahouses.html>.

A useful guide to commonly used tea utensils can be found in Sen, Genshitsu and Sōshitsu Sen, eds. *Urasenke Chadō*. Kyoto: Tankosha, 2001, or online, <http://tiny.cc/9tq0uw>.

The New Way of Tea, Asia Society’s 2002 exhibition of modern and innovative tea utensils may be accessed online, <http://bit.ly/XAfoOM>.

Reference Materials

The Japanese Architecture and Art Net User System (JAANUS) online dictionary contains approximately 8,000 terms related to traditional Japanese arts, including numerous tea ceremony terms. Other topics include traditional gardens, painting, sculpture, and art-historical iconography from approximately the first century CE to the end of the Edo period, <http://www.aisf.or.jp/~jaanus/>.

Supplies

Matcha, the powdered green tea used in chanoyu, and the basic utensils needed for its preparation are increasingly becoming available outside of Japan. While there is no substitution for real matcha, most utensils other than the bamboo tea whisk can be improvised. Check your local organic grocers or order what you need online. Here is a list of selected providers:

Matcha and More, <http://www.matchaandmore.com>.

Tea Dogu carries a wide selection of whisks, scoops, bowls, and other tools, <http://www.teadogu.com>.

Tea Passage, <http://www.tea-passage.com/>.

Teavana, <http://www.teavana.com/>.

on tea history and is also the focus of Japanese director Hiroshi Teshigahara's 1989 feature film *Rikyū*, which is widely available in North America (English subtitles). In addition, the corpus of tea literature available in English includes many biographical sketches and anecdotal accounts of these figures that may be used as course readings for students to approach tea from the perspective of actual practitioners during the Muromachi and Tokugawa periods.² Finally, the previously referenced SPICE curriculum unit on tea provides an excellent starting point insofar as two of the five include a lesson plan focused on historical tea figures, offering student handouts, short readings, and activities themed around the social history of chadō.

Material Culture

The wide range of objects employed in the practice of chadō provides educators with a unique opportunity to explore material culture in meaningful ways. The names and functions of typical implements can be learned through consulting translated instructional manuals for *temae* (tea preparation) or even accessed through the Internet. A number of art exhibitions in the West have been organized around or include artifacts designed specifically for use in the way of tea, and some of these exhibitions developed curriculum guides for teachers. One such example is the UCLA Fowler Museum's 2009 exhibition *Steeped in History: The Art of Tea*, which includes a lesson on Japanese tea culture that links chadō to the practice of *renga* (Japanese-linked poetry), the literary art from which tea's defining aesthetic quality of *wabi* is said to have been derived.³

Wabi, a guiding aesthetic principle of chadō, is defined as encompassing connotations of "the retired life, astringency, soberness, simplicity, and rusticity."⁴ As a notion, wabi has recently come into vogue among Western designers and architects, and a variety of books extolling "wabi style" have appeared in the marketplace since the year 2000. While the version of wabi expounded by such books is not necessarily the same thing described by the term in Japan, the burgeoning interest in wabi as a design concept in the West is a useful starting point for students to explore how tea objects and tearooms are considered to embody this concept around the world.⁵ While the SPICE *chanoyu* unit offers both a lesson on the spatial characteristics of traditional Japanese tearooms and a thirty-minute DVD segment depicting the setting and progress of a typical tea gathering, students could also explore this topic very effectively through the Internet via news and journal articles on the topic of innovative modern tearooms.⁶

Most North American museums with significant holdings in Japanese art include some representative tea objects, such as tea bowls or tea containers. Students can explore and work with these materials in a number of ways. One useful activity is to have students explore collections of tea utensils through exhibition catalogs or online collections and assemble a virtual *tori-awase*, or themed combination of utensils, for a singular tea gathering selected for aesthetic effect, historical qualities, seasonality, or other factors. Students would then present their deliberately constructed assembly of utensils and explain the unifying concepts that informed their curatorial decisions.

Seasonality

A finely nuanced attention to seasonal referents is a characteristic of many traditional arts in Japan, including visual culture, poetry, and cuisine. In the sphere of tea, the observation of season extends to all aspects of the gathering—the position of the fire in the room, the choice of hanging scroll and flowers on display, the sweets that accompany the tea, and the type and design motifs of utensils selected for use. The unifying lens of seasonality offers students a useful framework for the exploration of tea artifacts.

A key resource for the consideration of season in the tea realm is the 2002 translation of tea master Sasaki Sanmi's *Sadō Saijiki*, available in English as *Chadō: The Way of Tea: A Japanese Tea Master's Almanac*. This

encyclopedic resource is organized calendrically, listing seasonal themes and vocabulary, traditional observances, and appropriate flowers and foods for each of the twelve months of the year. A similar reference for seasonal terms utilized in Japanese haiku poetry is also accessible through the University of Virginia's Japanese Text Initiative.⁷ Students could organize their *tori-awase* around seasonal themes and research the natural motifs, yearly observances, and flora/fauna associated with each season, both within the tearoom and/or in poetic compilations.

Tea in the Classroom

As a key site of social interaction, a window into Japanese history, and an organizing framework for the examination of art objects, the academic exploration of chadō provides educators with an opportunity to guide students toward a deep and multilayered appreciation of Japanese history and culture. The recent emergence of many new resources for introducing this venerable art form to a new audience has made it easier than ever for teachers who live beyond the geographical reach of tea groups outside Japan to bring materials on this fascinating tradition into their history, literature, or social sciences curricula. ■

NOTES

1. Most tea practitioners avoid the term "tea ceremony," as "ceremony" implies a performance, possibly with religious overtones, in which some are participants and some are spectators. By contrast, tea gatherings are better understood as social events in which the cooperation of both hosts and guests create a shared and harmonious experience. In this essay, I tend to favor "the way of tea," "tea practice," or the commonly accepted Japanese term "chadō."
2. See Shigenori Chikamatsu, *Stories from a Tearoom Window (Chaso kanwa, 1804)*, ed. Mori, Toshiko (Rutland, VT: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1982).
3. The four-lesson curriculum unit for *Steeped in History* is available free online at http://www.international.ucla.edu/media/files/fowler_tea_curriculum.pdf.
4. *A Chanoyu Vocabulary: Practical Terms for the Way of Tea*, ed. Urasenke International Association (Kyoto: Tankosha, 2007), 232.
5. For more on wabi, see Kōshirō Haga, Martin Collcutt, "The Wabi Aesthetic through the Ages," trans. Paul Varley and Isao Kumakura, eds. *Tea in Japan: Essays on the History of Chanoyu* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1989).
6. Modern innovation in tearoom design is the topic of Michael Freeman, *New Zen: The Tea-Ceremony Room in Modern Japanese Architecture* (London: Eightbooks Ltd., 2007).
7. Sanmi Sasaki, *Chadō: The Way of Tea: A Japanese Tea Master's Almanac*, trans. McCabe, Shaun and Satoko Iwasaki (Boston: Tuttle Publishing, 2002). For the Japanese Text Initiative website, visit: <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/japanese/haiku/saijiki/>.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- A Chanoyu Vocabulary: Practical Terms for the Way of Tea*. eds. Urasenke International Association, Kyoto: Tankosha, 2007.
- Chikamatsu, Shigenori. *Stories from a Tearoom Window [Chaso kanwa, 1804]*. Ed. Mori, Toshiko. Rutland, VT: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1982.
- Hirota, Dennis, ed. *Wind in the Pines: Classic Writings of the Way of Tea as a Buddhist Path*. Kyoto: Asian Humanities Press, 1995.
- Lai, Selena, and Karen Tiegel. *Tea and the Japanese Tradition of Chanoyu*. Stanford, CA: Stanford Program on International and Cross-Cultural Education (SPICE), 2005.
- Pitelka, Morgan, ed. *Japanese Tea Culture: Art, History and Practice*. New York: Routledge, 2003.
- Sen, Genshitsu, and Sōshitsu Sen, eds. *Urasenke Chadō Textbook*. Kyoto: Tankosha, 2001.
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