

A Simple Bowl of Tea: Power Politics and Aesthetics in Hideyoshi's Japan, 1582–1591

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ABSTRACT: The traditional Japanese tea gathering, or *chanoyu*, embodies the Zen values of respect, harmony, purity, and tranquility, expressed through a rigorously-scripted, and now largely feminized, ritual. Although it seems far removed from centres of political power, it was brilliantly put to political ends in Japan's Warring States Period (ca. 1467–1603) by Toyotomi Hideyoshi, son of a peasant, who, through palace intrigues and military prowess, helped unify Japan, becoming its *de facto* ruler. A crucial step in Hideyoshi's consolidation of power was his series of tea gatherings, in which he demonstrated cultural favour that translated into political dominance. Assisting Hideyoshi was the tea master Sen Rikyū. This paper explores how Hideyoshi and Rikyū used tea gatherings as part of the political and military strategy of the time.

The year is 1582. A century-long civil war continues to ravage Japan, with competing *daimyō* (feudal warlords) vying for territory while a succession of figurehead emperors, barricaded by largely impotent *shōguns* (Japan's highest ranking military commander), remains sidelined. Oda Nobunaga, a talented general working with the emperor's blessing, is on the verge of unifying Japan by bringing the *daimyō* to heel when he is treasonously ambushed by one of his lieutenants, Akechi Mitsuhide, while pausing at a temple for tea. Nobunaga dies honourably (by *seppuku*, ritual suicide by disembowelment), instructing his page to set fire to the temple to avoid Mitsuhide from seizing as trophies his head and, equally important, the few pieces of tea wares he carried. Within weeks Mitsuhide, too, is dead: Toyotomi Hideyoshi, another of Nobunaga's lieutenants, attacks and slaughters much of Mitsuhide's army, while Mitsuhide, ignominiously fleeing defeat, is killed by peasants. Hideyoshi collects Mitsuhide's severed remains, offers them to the spirit of Nobunaga, muscled aside Nobunaga's legitimate heirs, and claims Nobunaga's vast collection of tea wares. With these acts, Hideyoshi steps into Nobunaga's shoes as the best hope to put an end to Japan's civil war.

Hideyoshi's victory is horrific: bloodied heads of thousands of Mitsuhide's troops litter the roads.¹ To celebrate his victory in this gorily turbulent time, Hideyoshi hosts a *chanoyu*, or tea gathering.² The choice of tea seems odd: alcohol-fuelled drinkfests are the near-universal way of boasting militaristic might, and we know from contemporaneous accounts that sixteenth-century *daimyō* hosted plenty of heavy drinking parties and that

Hideyoshi entertained with sake.³ So why choose tea to mark this important occasion? Because *chanoyu* offered unique opportunities during the concluding years of the Warring States Period (ca. 1467–1603) to express the host's sophistication, social standing, and, in Hideyoshi's case, political legitimacy. Hideyoshi's 1582 tea gathering was the first among many designed to convince key actors in Japanese society to accept him as the *de facto* ruler of Japan. Although the practice of tea had become a regular activity among much of Japan's *daimyō* and merchant classes, hosting a *chanoyu* was risky; the performance was judged by the guests/audience, and a poor performance would undermine, rather than reinforce, the host's status. Hideyoshi knew that he needed help to use tea effectively: the etiquette of sixteenth-century tea was in flux, and Hideyoshi was born a peasant. Under the tutelage of various tea masters, especially Sen Rikyū, nowadays lauded as the most skilled practitioner of all, Hideyoshi mastered enough of the art to earn cultural capital. But *chanoyu* also masked other pursuits, ones that transcended tea and made Rikyū invaluable as Hideyoshi's trusted advisor, equivalent to an executive's chief of staff. Cosseted in a secluded tea room, tea practitioners forged alliances and negotiated for the tools of warfare — armour, guns, musket balls, and gunpowder — without arousing suspicion. Rikyū was Hideyoshi's envoy to this world of armament makers. If those roles seem impossibly contradictory — preparing a simple bowl of tea embodied the Zen values of harmony, purity, respect, and tranquillity, the opposite of the dealer in arms — we delve into the unique circumstances of the Warring States Period.

Context: Social Hierarchy and Tea

Sixteenth-century Japan was in turmoil, lacking a strong central authority, its economy in shambles. The old order that had defined the appropriate roles and ambitions of individuals based on their occupations and perceived contributions to society was teetering. Traditionally, political power and the social hierarchy reflected Japan's amalgam of the philosophical teachings of Confucianism and the melding of Shintoism with Zen Buddhism.⁴ Japanese society fell into four castes, although a few key players remained outside the system. At the apex and outside of the castes stood the emperor, a quasi-deity with cultural heft but no real power; isolated behind palace walls, he interfaced only with the uppermost aristocracy. Beneath the emperor was the aristocratic *shōgun*, a hereditary military ruler. Historically the real power

behind the throne, the shōgūn and the emperor had for centuries engaged in the fiction that the emperor's 'selection' of the shōgūn was the act that bestowed legitimacy on this individual. This 'emperor selection' would be a key strategy in legitimising Hideyoshi's power and was a driver for one of his most important tea gatherings.

Beneath the shōgūn came the four castes, the highest being the aristocracy, made up of samurai (warriors) and daimyō (feudal landowners). In second place were peasant farmers: although they may have stunk of the fields, they enjoyed social status as producers of food essential for the country's well-being. Third were artisans, one rung lower because their products, while useful, were less necessary to Japan's well-being. Last came the merchants, who were thought to contribute nothing productive to society; merchants were necessary parasites, profiting off the labours of others in a way that seemed just short of dishonourable. Merchants supported Buddhist temples in an attempt to improve their karma.⁵ Although the chasm between the aristocracy and the lower castes was theoretically great, the dislocations of the Warring States Period meant that a poor samurai might find himself farming for subsistence when not on the battlefield, while wealthy merchants hobnobbed with warlords. Outside the caste system were Buddhist monks, who could move with ease among all classes.⁶

Tea practices expressed this class structure by its different forms and material culture in the late sixteenth century. Aristocrats practiced a shoin form that used (mainly) imported Chinese porcelains, while suki tea, which used both imported and Japanese wares, was popular with the merchants. The last form to emerge, wabi tea, was an offshoot of suki tea, privileging the rustic Japanese wares first appreciated in suki practice over all others, and Rikyū was a key innovator of the wabi aesthetic.⁷ The style of Hideyoshi's tea gatherings varied, as he employed elements of all three, depending on his audience and political goals.

Chanoyū is rooted in the meditative and religious practices found at Zen monasteries, where the quotidian making of tea was seen as a way of communing with deities and thus paid subtle homage to the emperor.⁸ Tea drinking (not yet the ritualised performance of chanoyū) moved to courtly circles in the medieval period and became an aristocratic pastime. As tea settled into courtly life, specific performative behaviours emerged during the Ashikaga Shōgūnate (1338–1573) that would mark shoin tea. Ostentation lay at its heart. Ashikaga aesthetics centred on karamono-suki ('the love for Chinese things'), and the Ashikaga shōgūns were the first political leaders to amass collections of art, which had to be of superb quality, Chinese in origin, or bearing the imprimatur of the Chinese court. This adulation of Chinese culture expressed the political reality that Japan was, essentially, a vassal state from the fourteenth through mid-sixteenth centuries, dependent on China for trade. When China stopped direct trade with Japan in the mid-sixteenth century, piracy and the Portuguese became the route by which goods entered Japan.⁹

Aristocrats took pride in acquiring Chinese porcelains from the Tang, Song and early Ming Dynasties, but they were credited with cultural capital only if the objects passed tests of connoisseurship, including authenticity. A fake Chinese vessel passed off as real was an insult bordering on treachery.¹⁰ To navigate these cultural shoals, specialists, known as dōbōshū, were retained to advise on all manners of the arts and to curate aristocratic collections of karamono, much like art consultants advise today's plutocrats on purchases of stratospherically priced contemporary art. Dōbōshū is often translated as 'companion,' indicating that dōbōshū were part of the feudal household. They prepared tea for the guests of the aristocrats out of sight, and the guests drank the tea in rooms outfitted with shoin, alcoves and desks for the display of karamono.¹¹ Shoin tea was the concluding phase to a banquet, not the focus of a social event, and it was where aristocrats could demonstrate their expertise by identifying and discussing the qualities of the tea.¹²

While karamono were essential for shoin tea, suki tea, sometimes called 'merchant tea,' was based on another category of tea wares known as meibutsu, or 'famous objects.' Meibutsu were highly coveted by aspirants to status, primarily wealthy merchants, who sought large collections of meibutsu. While a piece of karamono might also be meibutsu, meibutsu were not limited to Chinese imports. As suki tea evolved over the course of the sixteenth century, certain pieces of Japanese and Korean wares, aesthetically distinct from Chinese porcelains, came to be considered meibutsu. Each piece of meibutsu was identified by a unique name, as if imbuing inanimate objects with vitality. This attribution of vitality meant that meibutsu represented their owners in a very direct way; performing tea using a piece of meibutsu (and meibutsu were sometimes lent by a politically or socially useful personage for a tea gathering) brought the essence of the owner to the tea, the meibutsu functioning as a metonym or avatar for the absent party.¹³ Meibutsu commanded extravagant prices, fuelled by meibutsu-gari, hunts for these treasured vessels that could be concluded through purchase, through gift-exchanges, or, as in the case of warlords, commandeered as booty. Nobunaga's instruction to set fire to the temple as he committed seppuku was designed to destroy his pieces of meibutsu; it defiantly denied Mitsuhide possession of the relics.

While prosperous merchants collected both karamono and meibutsu, they typically lacked social standing to retain dōbōshū or to build banquet rooms for shoin in their urban homes for tea service.¹⁴ They held their suki teas in small tearooms defined by the number of tatami mats (a standardised measure slightly under one meter by one-half meter) used on the floor: a four-and-one-half mat teahouse was typical and allowed host and guest to closely observe each other's behaviour. With the help of independent tea masters, merchants and others learned to prepare tea for their guests themselves, developing

performative rules that would eventually evolve into the chanoyu. These tea masters were typically drawn from the merchant class or were junior aristocrats who would not inherit a landed fief; they studied at Zen temples to learn the finer points of tea, and many were like actors today, making money in several fields, with only the most successful being able to devote themselves fully to tea.

Wabi tea developed during the sixteenth century and was a return to tea's Zen roots. Wabi eschewed the conspicuous consumption of suki tea, as wabi practitioners did not amass large collections of tea wares and certainly did not seek karamono. Simplicity and rusticity were the aesthetic goals of wabi, implicitly challenging the values of practitioners of shoin and suki tea. Spaces for wabi practice were even smaller than for suki tea: Rikyū's ideal wabi space was a grass tea hut of one-and-one-half mats, demanding extreme intimacy between host and a very small number of guests, with no hiding the slightest performative stumble. Rikyū is reputed to have furthered the wabi style by commissioning from the ceramicist Chōjirō 'exquisitely imperfect' tea bowls — bowls crafted entirely by hand without the smoothing benefit of the potter's wheel, thickly glazed at a low temperature (unlike porcelain and stoneware), and with edges and surfaces that were often uneven. Known as 'raku,' examples quickly became meibutsu and are among the most revered tea wares, then and today.¹⁵ The appeal of these bowls lies in the fact that being fully handmade, the potter was acutely sensitive to how the bowl would feel when held in the hand, where subtle variations in shape and texture would give tactile pleasure; the low temperature firing also meant that such bowls conducted heat less efficiently, hence, were more comfortable to hold.¹⁶ Although wabi tea's minimalism might seem designed with the poorest tea men in mind, practitioners of wabi often came from educated and affluent backgrounds: they were 'not ordinary beggars, ... but men who had tasted wealth and success but chose to abandon their position and comfort.'¹⁷

We can now turn to our two protagonists, Toyotomi Hideyoshi and Sen Rikyū, and the two most important of Hideyoshi's many chanoyu orchestrated by Rikyū to cement Hideyoshi's position as de facto ruler of Japan.

Shattering Boundaries by Serving Tea

The success of Hideyoshi and Rikyū was improbable given the circumstances of their births. Shakespeare's rhetorical question, 'what's in a name?' would seem nonsensical in sixteenth-century Japan, where names circumscribed ambition: neither Hideyoshi nor Rikyū were born with status-bestowing names that would allow them to ascend into the imperial realm. But Hideyoshi cleverly manipulated palace politics to garner appropriate names for both himself and Rikyū.

Hideyoshi (1536–1598) was born into a farming family so modest that it lacked a surname: he was known simply as

'Hashiba,' even as he rose through the ranks from sandal carrier and foot soldier to lieutenant general under Nobunaga's command. Only in 1585, three years after the defeat of Mitsuhide, did he become known as Hideyoshi, a name that the politically ambitious soldier selected for himself because its auspicious characters connoted 'Bountiful Minister.' Perhaps he hoped that the name could make his elevation to high governmental office seem inevitable, or at least, desirable, but not everyone was convinced: one daimyō rival thought of him as a 'jumped-up little peasant.'¹⁸

Hideyoshi's humble origins contributed to his need to establish political legitimacy through symbolic acts and courtly etiquette: the peasant-turned-soldier-turned-conquering hero was tantalisingly close to ruling Japan, leaping over the traditional paths to power.¹⁹ The era even had a name for this sense of topsy-turviness: gekokujō, or 'the low oppressing the high.'²⁰ Hideyoshi biographer Mary Elizabeth Berry argues that Hideyoshi shrewdly attained political legitimacy at court by manoeuvring the emperor to appoint him kampaku, or Imperial Regent. Hideyoshi faced two obstacles to this appointment: first, no military man had ever held this position, and second, the position was reserved for a member of the aristocratic Fujiwara clan. Hideyoshi was able to finesse these impediments by lavishly spreading the spoils of war to the cash-strapped emperor and court and convincing a member of the Fujiwara clan (whether through bribery or threats is unknown) to adopt him.²¹ With the adoption, he became known (temporarily) as Fujiwara Hideyoshi, thereby checking off the necessary 'I'm an aristocrat' box that veiled his upending of tradition and allowed the emperor to overlook his military status. As an expression of gratitude to the emperor for the appointment, and to stifle dissent at court by communicating the obvious favour in which the emperor held him, Hideyoshi decided to serve the emperor tea, assisted by his indispensable aide, Rikyū.

This was breathtakingly audacious. Hideyoshi's tea for the emperor is the first known time that an emperor was the guest at a palace chanoyu. The fact that no emperor had ever participated in tea gatherings is less shocking when one considers the quasi-deity status of the emperor and the cultural mythologies surrounding meibutsu.²² While aristocrats and courtiers had amused themselves with tea for several centuries, the emperor had remained above these formal entertainments owing to concerns about the objects that would be used. Everything that would touch the emperor needed to be new, that is, ritually pure, and the objects had to be destroyed on conclusion of the chanoyu because they would immediately attain the status of meibutsu. Emperor meibutsu could be politically destabilising, as the presence of such pieces would be tantamount to the presence and approval of the emperor himself.

Hideyoshi's tea for the emperor faced another hurdle: Rikyū (1522–1591) was a commoner and could not be in the presence of the emperor. Indeed, Rikyū's merchant-class lineage as the son of a moderately prosperous fish

wholesaler was even more problematic than Hideyoshi's peasant origins. Rikyū was born with the name Tanaka Yoshiro in the port city of Sakai, one of the entrepôts for trade with China and the Portuguese, as well as a magnet for smuggling by pirates. Sakai was also known for its metal smithing; the Portuguese introduced muskets into Japan in 1543, and Sakai metal smiths reverse engineered the Portuguese weapons, creating a gun known as the 'Sakai musket.' Merchant-tea men such as Rikyū and Imai Sokyū acted as middlemen between these metalsmiths and the warlords eager to acquire these new weapons and a reliable supply of ammunition.²³ The latter, nicknamed 'gunpowder Sokyū,' sold arms and tea wares to Nobunaga.²⁴ Rikyū, too, was deep into the trade: a 1575 letter from Nobunaga to Rikyū, thanks him for the 'gift' of one thousand musket balls.²⁵

The precocious Rikyū had received tea training at several Zen monasteries and was a respected tea master identified by the name 'Sōeki,' as a teenager, but he was not a priest.²⁶ To gain access to the palace, Rikyū needed either a courtly appointment or priestly designation. Although there is scholarly debate when Rikyū was first known by that name, all agree that, no later than the 1585 emperor's tea, Sōeki formally used the name Rikyū Kōji (Buddhist lay priest).²⁷ In Hideyoshi's belt-and-suspenders approach to conferring legitimacy on himself and those around him, the emperor granted Rikyū the suggestively aristocratic title of Grand Master of Tea, a title that still identifies the most respected contemporary practitioners of chanoyu.²⁸

The emperor's tea was successful, and with the title *kampaku*, Hideyoshi could issue decrees in the name of the emperor, cementing his position as the *de facto* ruler of the vast majority of Japan. His ambition did not stop, however, as he continued efforts to bring every province of Japan under his control, as well as planning invasions of Korea and China to become hegemon of Asia. Returning to Kyoto in 1587, flush from a victory in Kyūshū Province, Hideyoshi laid the foundation for enlisting all Japanese to celebrate his success, support his future endeavours, and acknowledge his cultural supremacy: he invited all tea practitioners, both Japanese and foreign, to the most famous tea gathering of all, the Grand Kitano.²⁹

Cementing Power by Serving Tea

The Grand Kitano was stunning in its ambition. Hideyoshi issued an invitation to 'all practitioners' who were summoned to appear at the Grand Kitano shrine for a ten-day fete. All forms of tea would be served, and Hideyoshi's Golden Tea Room (a portable, *suki*-sized tea house constructed in 1586 in which every surface was magnificently covered in gold or rich red brocade), as well as his power-communicating *meibutsu* would be on display. Hideyoshi, guided by Rikyū and others, promised that he would personally serve all *wabi* practitioners. The invitation was posted at thoroughfares surrounding Kyoto,

and by its terms, as quoted by Cort (1982), we can see the tensions among the styles of *chanoyu* and Hideyoshi's threatening tone:

Lord Hideyoshi will assemble his entire collection of *meibutsu*, omitting not a single one, in order to show them to all serious followers of [*chanoyu*]...

For the enclosures, two-mat huts [small for *suki* tea, but often used by *wabi* practitioners] will be appropriate in the Kitano pine groves, although *wabi* tea men may simply spread mat-covers or rice-hull bags...

Lord Hideyoshi's attendance is motivated by his feeling of compassion for *wabi* tea men. Any among such people who fail to attend will be prohibited hereafter from preparing even *kogashi* [an ersatz, barley tea], and anyone paying a visit to such a person will suffer the same punishment.

Lord Hideyoshi has proclaimed that he will prepare tea personally for all *wabi* tea men, not only those attending from distant places.

Hideyoshi was appealing to all classes of tea practitioners, from elites focused on *meibutsu* to the *wabi* ascetics. He undoubtedly anticipated a warm reception that would include awestruck visits to his Golden Tea Room; instead, the one-thousand plus attendees seemed more taken with the simplicity and imperfection of the *wabi* tea utensils than with Hideyoshi's glittering Tea Room and ostentatious *meibutsu*. Hideyoshi abruptly canceled the remainder of the event after the first day, leaving many of the assembled practitioners baffled. Contemporaneous sources explained Hideyoshi's change of plan with the face-saving 'sudden' news of unrest in Kyūshū Province, yet the minor uprising had been known for weeks. Kind scholars suggest that Hideyoshi was exhausted after the first day's tea-making, as he is credited with serving 203 guests and could not muster the energy to continue making bowl upon bowl of tea for the *wabi* men; the more critical suggest that the triumph of *wabi* aesthetics over Hideyoshi's Golden Tea Room and *meibutsu* struck at the source of his prestige, something that Hideyoshi, ever attuned to the semiotics of tea, needed to squelch.³⁰

Although Hideyoshi and Rikyū would continue their relationship for several more years, some believe that the Grand Kitano was the genesis of the rift that would, in 1591, cause Hideyoshi to order Rikyū to commit *seppuku*. Certainly the assembly's focus on the *wabi* wares instead of the host's *meibutsu* suggests that the 'famous objects' so proudly displayed by Hideyoshi had the opposite effect of what Hideyoshi intended and point to a man who remained insecure. The governmental documents announcing Rikyū's death sentence identify two 'crimes': first, a wooden statue of Rikyū wearing sandals was placed among the Shinto deities above an entrance archway at a temple, which was interpreted as an insult because Rikyū

would be symbolically trampling upon Hideyoshi when he passed underneath, and second, Rikyū manipulated the market in tea utensils to profit excessively. The latter charge seems ironic, as the characters that make Rikyū's mean 'to rest from profit,' which some interpret as an homage to wabi values.³¹ Whether these transgressions justified the death sentence or whether other reasons lurked beneath Hideyoshi's decision to rid himself of his wabi-loving advisor, has sparked much scholarly debate. One theory blames the death sentence on an alleged refusal by Rikyū to permit his daughter to serve as Hideyoshi's concubine, but most scholars are ultimately at a loss to explain Hideyoshi's action, and the charges seem thin.³²

Rikyū, like many merchants, contributed to the building and maintenance of Buddhist temples as a way of expunging the taint of parasitical profit; donor statues were customary, as was the placement. Hideyoshi initially exiled both the temple's head priest and Rikyū when he learned of the statue in the public square.³³ Yet Hideyoshi soon pardoned the temple's head priest responsible for erecting the statue while condemning Rikyū to death.³⁴ The second 'crime', profiteering, proves equally unsatisfactory. Rikyū's position as tea master required him to value tea utensils, and high values would benefit Hideyoshi.³⁵ Hideyoshi's decision likely had more to do with politics and perceptions than with his tea master enriching himself through the sale of raku tea bowls. Indeed, those who engage in psycho-history argue that Rikyū was seen as a threat because his wabi style of practice undermined all of the ceremonial and material culture trappings that had so carefully carried Hideyoshi to power: Rikyū's championing of wabi was a cultural threat to Hideyoshi's grandiosity and legitimacy.³⁶

One other insecurity plagued Hideyoshi: an heir to inherit his domains. When both his elder son and his trusted step-brother died, Hideyoshi had only an infant son as likely successor. He would need to rely on vassals to suppress uprisings that would occur in the power vacuum triggered by his death, and he undoubtedly remembered how he had used Nobunaga's death to defeat not only the Mitsuhide faction, but those supporting Nobunaga's heir apparent. The behind-the-scenes politicking is murky and complex, but it seems that Rikyū was inevitably swept up in these machinations and may have been seen as falling on the wrong side in the internecine jockeying that was already anticipating Japan after Hideyoshi.³⁷

Statecraft through Tea

The chanoyu for the emperor and the Grand Kitano were pageantry writ large, critically important as symbolic exercises of power, but they were not the only way in which statecraft was conducted. Putting aside the very practical role of tea men as arms dealers, letters from and about Rikyū and Hideyoshi show how highly aestheticised tea was a foil for realpolitik. Rikyū's political role began while

he was advising Nobunaga in 1580; as quoted in Plutschow (2003), Rikyū wrote to a friendly merchant that,

I was really surprised at how very beautiful the 'Yoshii' kettle is. As promised, I am forwarding you a draft [of battle orders] ... as well as a map of Tottori [Castle, the planned point of the siege. If you] keep it for three or five days, everybody should be able to have a look at it. ... If you send his Lordship [Nobunaga] a congratulatory gift, it would be most appropriate to present him with your above-mentioned kettle as ... [Mitsuhide] will probably want to have it.³⁸

This letter demonstrates Rikyū's role as diplomatic envoy, the need to work with merchants for battlefield success, and the remarkable value of meibutsu, epitomised in the Yoshii kettle.

Hideyoshi, too, recognised that statecraft happened over a bowl of tea, something he learned from Nobunaga. Nobunaga was so aware of the power of tea that he forbade his soldiers to conduct tea gatherings, reserving that privilege to himself, with rare exceptions, calling it chanoyu seido, or tea gathering politics. Both Hideyoshi's and Mitsuhide's battlefield successes were rewarded with the right to hold tea gatherings in the few years before Nobunaga's murder.³⁹ As Hideyoshi later wrote, '[T]ea is the way of politics. I will never forget the fact that I was instructed [by Nobunaga] and given permission to practice it.'⁴⁰ In claiming that tea is the way of politics, Hideyoshi recognised the multivalent uses of tea: as political performance, but also as useful ruse: tea gatherings, conducted by an itinerant tea master, were an ideal way to send confidential messages. A trusted wandering tea man aroused few suspicions, and traders could dabble in diplomacy or espionage while on meibutsu-gari.⁴¹

After Hideyoshi was named kampaku, he spent much of his governmental time at Jurakutei, his administrative palace in Kyoto, where Rikyū had a private home and tea hut.⁴² Rikyū functioned as Hideyoshi's chief of staff, controlling access by suppliants to Hideyoshi. One such suppliant, the daimyō Otomo Sorin, visited Hideyoshi in 1586 to thank him for intervening in a minor dispute with a neighbouring daimyō; after speaking with Hideyoshi, Sorin was brought to the Golden Tea Room, where Hideyoshi and Rikyū served him tea. Sorin later reflected on Rikyū's powerful role (Plutschow 2003):

I cannot fully describe in words the way in which Master Rikyū gave advice on this occasion and exerted himself on our behalf. Never will I be able to forget it. As it looks here, I believe that there is no one other than Sōeki who can say even a word to the Kampaku. In general, it seems quite extraordinary. At any rate, it is absolutely essential that now and in the future we have deep-felt, unreserved and intimate relations with... Sōeki.⁴³

The Legacy of Hideyoshi and Rikyū

Hideyoshi died in 1598, having come close to establishing a Pax Japonica on the island and establishing military dominance abroad. His successor, Tokugawa Isao, would complete the task of unifying Japan, heralding the dawn of the Tokugawa Shogūnate in 1603. But before Hideyoshi died, he enacted laws that returned Japan to its strict social hierarchies, precluding another talented peasant from rising to become the most powerful man in the country and an aristocrat by adoption. He also confiscated the swords of the samurai, claiming he needed the metal for a giant statue of Buddha.

Chanoyu would continue as an aristocratic pastime under the Tokugawa, but it would never be put to the political uses that had marked Hideyoshi's ascension and reign.⁴⁴ The Tokugawa Shogūnate endured until 1867, when that antiquated regime succumbed to pressures, both internally and from Western powers, to open Japan to foreign influences, trade, and modernisation under an actual, power-wielding emperor of the Meiji clan; it was during this period, when Japan again was struggling to redefine its identity against a backdrop of political and cultural upheaval, that chanoyu assumed renewed importance, not as a tool of political power, but as distinct and unifying expression of Japanese-ness.

Commemorations of the Grand Kitano started in the late 1870s.⁴⁵ In 1936 and 1941, shortly before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour, celebrations of the 350th anniversary of the Grand Kitano and of Rikyū's death stirred nationalist sentiment.⁴⁶ In Japanese schoolbooks and in popular culture, much of the credit for inventing this embodiment of Japanese-ness has been attributed to the martyr of chanoyu, Rikyū, and his Lord Hideyoshi, whose Grand Kitano continues to be remembered in Japan's Culture Day celebrations.⁴⁷

About the author

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Notes

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2. Some scholars and Japan's Omotesenke school of tea practitioners translate chanoyu as a 'tea gathering' or 'way of tea,' although others (and popular imagination) translate it as 'tea ceremony' because of its rigorous choreography. I use the term 'gathering' because the practice of tea was still evolving in the late sixteenth century. For information on this 1582 chanoyu, see Berry, Mary Elizabeth (1982). Hideyoshi. Harvard University Press, pp. 71–2; Fujikawa, Asako (1957). Cha-no-yu and Hideyoshi. Hokuseido Press, pp. 33–4, 53 n.10; Pitelka, Morgan (2017). 'Chinese Ceramics and Warrior Sociability in Sixteenth-Century Japan,' in Dora C.Y. Chin, et al., eds, Around Chigusa: Tea and the Arts of Sixteenth-Century Japan Princeton University Press, p. 65.
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4. See generally, de Bary, Wm. Theodore, ed. (2008). Sources of East Asian Tradition, vol. 1: Premodern Asia. Columbia University Press, pp. 634–5; 641; 683; 744–45; 751; 801–06; 844.
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8. Plutschow 2003, p. 15.
9. Jansen, Marius B. (2000). The Making of Modern Japan. Belknap Press, pp. 4–5.
10. Slusser, Dale (2003). 'The transformation of tea practice in sixteenth-century Japan,' in Pitelka, Morgan, ed., Japanese Tea Culture: Art, History and Practice. Taylor & Francis, pp. 105–46, at 107; Plutschow 2003, pp. 42–3, 56–7; Hoffman, Michael. 'Once Upon a Time, China Anointed a "King of Japan."' Japan Times, February 15, 2014. https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2014/02/15/national/history/once-upon-a-time-china-anointed-a-king-of-japan/#.WirEZFQ-c_U, last accessed 10 Dec 2017.
11. Sen, Soshitsu (1998). The Japanese Way of Tea. University of Hawai'i Press, pp.177–8.
12. Slusser 2003, pp. 108–9; Cort 1982, p. 19; Sakae 2006, p. 54.

13. Plutschow 2003, pp. 59–60.
14. Plutschow.
15. Pitelka, Morgan (2005). *Handmade Culture: Raku, Potters, Patrons, and Tea Practitioners in Japan*. University of Hawai'i Press, pp. 13–24. Pitelka questions conventional assertions that Rikyū commissioned Chōjirō to fashion wares, as none of Rikyū's extant writings refer to Chōjirō, but this lacuna is neither conclusive nor especially germane to the basic point that Rikyū was using a qualitatively different style of tea wares for wabi practice, that numerous ceramicists were experimenting with this new style in the sixteenth century, and that it was favourably received.
16. Pitelka, p. 27.
17. Cort 1982, p. 22.
18. Berry 1982, p. 179; Turnbull, Stephen (2002). *War in Japan, 1467–1615*. Osprey Publishing, p. 78; Bodart, Beatrice M. (1977). 'Tea and Counsel: The Political Role of Sen Rikyū.' *Monumenta Nipponica* 32(1):49–74, at p. 55.
19. See Lillehoj, Elizabeth (2011). *Art and Palace Politics in Early Modern Japan, 1580s-1680s*. Brill Online. DOI: 10.1163/9789004211261; Berry 1982; Cort 1982.
20. Lillehoj 2011, p. 27. This term has also been applied to the wabi aesthetic of imperfect earthenwares supplanting perfect porcelain.
21. Berry 1982, p. 187; Kumakura, Isao (1989), 'Sen No Rikyū: Inquiries into his Life and Tea,' (H. Paul Varley, tr), in Varley, H. Paul and Kumakura, Isao, eds., *Tea in Japan: Essays on the History of Chanoyu*. University of Hawaii Press, pp. 35–6; Pitelka 2017, pp. 66–7. Two years later, he would negotiate an even more prestigious adoption into the Toyotomi clan, bestowing upon him the name by which he is known today.
22. Lillehoj 2011, p. 27; Kumakura 1989, p. 35.
23. Sakae 2006, p. 53.
24. Petrucci 2005, 49–50, and n. 83; Watsky, Andrew M. (1995). 'Commerce, Politics, and Tea: The Career of Imai Sokyū.' *Monumenta Nipponica* 50(1):47–65, at pp. 55, 60–1.
25. Kumakura, 1989, pp. 33, 35; Watsky 1995, p. 62.
26. Plutschow 2003, p. 66; Bodart 1977, p. 51.
27. Many tea historians use the name Sōeki when referring to Rikyū before 1585, while others, such as Kumakura, believe that Rikyū had received the name Rikyū during his tea training at the Buddhist temples; what seems uncontroversial is that he was referred to as Rikyū Kōji ('Rikyū, Buddhist lay priest') for the emperor's tea.
28. Bodart 1977, p. 52; Watsky 1995, p. 65. Varley and Alison 1981, at p. 220, claim it was the emperor himself who bestowed the name Rikyū Kōji; they make no mention of the title 'Grand Master of Tea.'
29. Plutschow 2003, p. 95.
30. *Ibid.*, pp. 96–7; Cort 1982, pp. 22; 37–8.
31. Varley, H. Paul, and George Alison (1981). 'The Culture of Tea: From its Origins to Sen no Rikyū,' in Alison, George, and Bardwell L. Smith, eds., *Warlords, Artists & Commoners: Japan in the Sixteenth Century*. University of Hawaii Press, pp. 187–222, at p. 220.
32. Plutschow 2003, pp. 103–07; Varley and Alison 1981, pp. 220–2.
33. Varley and Alison 1981, p. 221; see generally, Sakae 2006.
34. Plutschow 2003, p. 104.
35. Plutschow, p. 105.
36. Plutschow, pp. 106–07; Cort 1982, p. 38.
37. Bodart 1977 attempts to explain this very complicated story, but admits that there are elisions; it nonetheless seems more plausible than the superficial accounts of an offensive statue or profiteering.
38. Plutschow 2003, p. 82.
39. Bodart-Bailey, Beatrice M. (1985). 'Tea and Politics in Late-Sixteenth Century Japan.' *Chanoyu Quarterly* 41:25–34., p. 31.
40. Quoted at Bodart-Bailey.
41. *Ibid* at 32.
42. Plutschow 2003, p. 101.
43. Plutschow, p. 93.
44. Plutschow at 25.
45. Sanmi, Sasaki [1960]. *Chado: The Way of Tea. A Japanese Master's Almanac*. Shaun McCabe, tr. (2002). Tuttle Publishing. p. 602.
46. For a discussion of tea in Japanese cinema and popular culture, see Cross, Tim (2003). 'Rikyū has left the tea room: National cinema interrogates the anecdotal legend,' in Pitelka, Morgan, ed., *Japanese Tea Culture: Art, History and Practice*. Taylor & Francis, pp. 308–69.
47. Surak, Kristin (2012). *Making Tea, Making Japan: Cultural Nationalism in Practice*. Stanford University Press., pp. 157–8.