

Multivalency in the Classical Japanese Aesthetic Locus: The Way of Tea

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Abstract

In this paper I present an anthropological analysis of *sado*, the way of tea. The drinking of tea has enjoyed a long and continuous history in Japan. During the sixteenth century however it transformed into a complex and symbolically imbued art form. I present a brief historical background, and present some of the essential aesthetic and philosophical principles underlying this development. Anthropological analysis is particularly apt for helping navigate and understand the intricate ritual structures of the tea ceremony within a greater and more inclusive cultural context.

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Japanese culture and art have long fascinated the West (Watts 1957, Maquet 1971). Art is particularly integral to culture. It both reflects and adapts, developing new cultural expressions along the way. But it does not create from nothing. New forms are imbued with older cultural structures. Therefore, a discussion of Japanese classical art would do well to begin with a discussion of Zen Buddhism. D. T. Suzuki (1959: 21) asserts that Zen permeates the “cultural life” of Japanese people. Within this cultural life, the tea ceremony has been a particularly potent genre since the 15th century and continues to hold a key position in Japanese aesthetics (Dumoulin 1990: 231, Izutsu and Izutsu 1981: 46). In this paper I will present a brief historical background of the way of tea. Then, applying anthropological theory I will examine just what it is that people do when they engage in the symbolic practice called *sado* in Japanese, the way of tea. Integral to this discussion will be a survey of some of its fundamental philosophical components and its representativeness of a particular socio-political climate.

While Buddhism itself has a long and illustrious history in Japan, the sects specifically seen as those following a Zen approach arrived in the late twelfth century (Watts 1959: 107, Suzuki 1959: 29). Suzuki (1959: 21) relates that the earlier esoteric Buddhist sects confined themselves strictly to the spiritual life of their initiated followers. I take this to mean in contrast to Zen which was comparatively accessible to the common people with its simpler tenets and active artistic influence, since the links between early Japanese Buddhist schools and the Japanese feudal elite are well documented (Dumoulin 1990, Watts 1959, Friday 1995). In support of this Suzuki (1959: 19-28) cites an outpouring of production in various artistic forms including poetry, painting, gardening, calligraphy, pottery, architecture, flower arrangement and incense appreciation. Those characteristics thought of by many, both within and outside of Japan, as

particularly Japanese are seen to be the direct result of the influence of Zen. Examples such as the “one corner style” of painting wherein the brushwork is simple almost to the point of abstraction and generally confined to a corner of the paper or silk, or the studied artlessness of an intentionally “flawed” teacup, the use of a single bud in mid-blossom rather than a full bouquet in flower arranging are all cited as representative of Zen’s suggestive, rather than a discursive, pedagogical approach to being in the world (Suzuki 1959: 22-27).

I am inclined to question the veracity of an approach that asserts that Japanese culture since the twelfth century is a culture of Zen. Zen itself is a syncretic and diverse system of beliefs. It arose from the ethics of Indian Buddhist practices, clearly incorporated Taoist metaphysics during its growth in China and found congruence in Japan with indigenous Shinto practices focused on the immanence of the natural world (Izutsu and Izutsu 1981: 49, Watts 1959, Dumoulin 1990). Further, Suzuki elides the persistent historical presence of Shinto shrine architecture and sculpture as well as the incorporation of Confucian virtue cosmology as found, for example, in the symmetry and subdued decorative style and design of shrines and particularly in imperially sponsored works. Surely he knows of these things as well and only means to suggest as do his colleagues the Izutsus (1981: 46) and Earhart (1982: 102), that the qualities and values associated with Zen came to overlay those of the earlier systems in a way that was at least partly syncretic and inclusive. Maquet’s concept of aesthetic loci provides a useful perspective regarding concentrations of aesthetic emphasis (1971). He illustrates that one should expect to find a qualitative difference in the aesthetic phenomena within a locus but that art objects can be produced from outside as well. Bellah (1957: 17) points out that in Japan peripheral values, i.e. peripheral to what he terms “clusters of cultural values” were perceived to be threatening. With Zen focused on the

spiritual and psychological nature of the individual experience the social elite sensed a threat to the status quo of communal values and experiences (Bellah 1957: 17). Indeed I surmise that it is the tension and friction between inside/outside, at the conceptual edge, so to speak, of a locus that can inspire new aesthetic expressions. It seems that Suzuki and Dumoulin, as historians of Zen may have slipped into the conceptual trap of reifying the structures of their field. While this provides an ease of analysis and elucidation, anthropological theory cautions us that these are social structures and therefore in constant flux as the agents of cultural matrices (artists, scholars, layman consumers of art and religious festivals, for example) are themselves constantly shifting their beliefs and behaviors, i.e. the consumption and production of cultural phenomena. Therefore we would do better not to exclude those aspects of art forms that lie outside, or seem inconsistent with Zen traditions. Dumoulin (1990: 221) points out that for five hundred years Zen enjoyed an unprecedented “dominant” influence in Japan during, “a time of extraordinary cultural growth”. Zen thus “saturated” Japanese culture such that, “the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries... produced the art forms and clarified the aesthetic values which to this day are most admired by the Japanese” (Hall in Dumoulin 1990: 221). He admits that not every cultural value should be attributed to Zen but accords it central place. Thanks to Maquet though, we can see that, while pervasive, it was one of many overlapping and interacting loci. Bellah’s cultural clusters then do not exist independently, but in dynamic relationships to other value clusters; loci within loci. A more fluid and interpenetrating approach to cultural structures seems beneficial to greater understanding. I assert that Zen’s malleability and non-dogmatic approach, it’s favoring of, “experience and intuition over intellection” (Kondo 1985: 287) made it accessible, at least superficially, to all levels of Japanese feudal society. It’s non-critical, non-verbal emphasis facilitated its

permeation of other cultural expressions. It borrowed from and freely informed other aesthetic loci. In other words, it played well with others. This contributed to its longevity and, reflecting on Hall above, its still current prevalence in modern Japan. For it seems to me a curious situation that many of the values that Japanese people hold today (quiet resolve in the face of hardship, self-control, simple adornment, emphasis on non-verbal communication) are those championed by Zen, and yet most Japanese are unaware of this. To summarize, the combination of these two approaches (interacting yet differing aesthetic philosophies and that of aesthetic loci) will be useful for understanding the development and multivalency of artistic movements in Japan specifically and applicable to a wider range of cultures as well. Thus, while a wide variety of arts do include a specifically Zen aesthetic, I suggest that the tea ceremony in particular has served as the nexus (a central locus within a greater field of interconnected loci) for the promulgation of its distinctive theory of beauty and its overarching presence in Japanese forms. In relation to it the dynamics of syncretism and the degree of cultural integration of Zen aesthetics will become clear.

To speak of Zen and Japanese art means to speak of *cha no yu*, the tea ceremony. A popular Japanese saying tells us that, “The taste of Zen (*ch’an*) and the taste of tea (*ch’a*) are the same” (quoted in Watts 1957: 86). This pun relies on the homology of the Chinese pronunciation of Zen (*cha’n*) with the Japanese word for green tea (*cha*). Interestingly, what seems a passing relation also points to a more concrete relationship between the development of Ch’an as a sect of Buddhism in China, and to the cultivation and drinking of tea by its followers. Zen tradition has it that an Indian monk named Bodhidharma brought his own very simple and direct meditative approach to Buddhism into southern China around 1500 B.P. (Watts 1957: 84, Dumoulin 1990: 10). Bodhidharma’s method

was simple: just sit – no dogma, no doctrine, no esoteric rituals. Basically, the goal was to hone one's concentration and free oneself of the bonds of ego. Watts relates an intriguing legend about the connection of this imposing figure with the origins of tea.

According to the story, while meditating in a cave Bodhidharma once fell asleep. Upon waking he was so angry with himself that he tore off his eyelids and cast them out of the cave so that he would never sleep again. The offending eyelids though, upon striking the ground, sprang up as the first ever tea plants. Since that time monks have relied on tea to stimulate and clarify their minds and to ward off unwanted drowsiness (Watts 1957: 85-86). Another legend worth noting in passing tells that Bodhidharma sat so long in meditation in the cave that his legs rotted off from lack of use! Sadly, this story does not relate the appearance of any new plant life as a result.

The Japanese nobility was consuming tea as early as the eighth century (Izutsu and Izutsu 1981: 46). Its elaboration into an art form though didn't come about until the sixteenth century arrival of a figure far more historical than Bodhidharma, the Zen monk and tea master Rikyu (Dumoulin 1990: 231, Izutsu and Izutsu 1981: 46). Rikyu firmly established the genuine foundations of the "way of tea," or *chado* (*sado* is more current today. Although the pronunciation differs the Chinese characters are the same). In brief, the Japanese suffix *do* ("way", *tao* in Chinese) signifies the incorporation of a complex range of metaphysical precepts dealing with the way of being in this world through the sincere and concentrated doing of some activity. Other examples among many of this usage include judo, the way of softness, and *shodo*, the way of calligraphy. Essentially, *do* requires treating the word "being" as a verb rather than as a static noun expressing a metaphysical state. It is active and process oriented, thus being is in the doing; doing with total focus. So, while one is imbibing

bitter green tea, one does that and only that, or so it would seem.

What Rikyu added to the seven hundred years of tea drinking in Japan was an emphasis on *wabi*. The incorporation of this stylistic representation of a Zen principle “drastically changed the significance of the entire range of aesthetic life-style, as well as the patterns of artistic expression and appreciation of the Japanese” (Izutsu and Izutsu 1981: 46). Echoing Suzuki’s assertion discussed earlier, the Izutsus also promote the idea that a “typically Japanese” aesthetic originated with the way of tea in the “wabi-style”. Their examples of typically Japanese include “asymmetry, incompleteness, imperfectness, unshapeliness and crude plainness” (1981: 47). During Rikyu’s lifetime these concepts were emphasized for the first time as aesthetic principles and represent a marked shift from the glamour of courtly artistic styles (Izutsu and Izutsu 1981: 47, Campbell 1962: 503).

This shift reflects an element of resistance within the conceptual framework of Zen and its representative lifestyle and artistic expressions. The earthy tones of color, emphasis on plainness and the presentation of enlightenment as accessible to all through the common activities of daily life (even menial labor is constructive if approached with the sincerity and engagement of a “do perspective”) challenged the status quo. These trends were in direct contrast to the elaborate etiquette and conspicuous displays of wealth of the imperial court and the exclusive schools of esoteric Buddhism which enjoyed court patronage. (Agency for Cultural Affairs 1972: 53-54, Earhart 1982: 43, 101) In fact, the samurai warrior class took up the practice of Zen most fervently (Bellah 1957: 16-17). Watts (1957: 107) notes that the arrival of Zen coincided with the rise of military governors, or shoguns, who wrested power from the nobility. Further, he asserts that a rejection of convention is prevalent in Zen and that this appealed to the needs of a professional warrior facing life or death decisions

on a daily basis. I agree that the directness and simplicity of its approach would have suited the psychological needs of a relatively uneducated class of professional soldiers. However, in consideration of the political turmoil involved in re-centralizing power under a new system, the shoguns must have perceived a need to suppress or devalue the older ideology and traditions, which had (until recently) been used so affectively by the nobility to manipulate and exclude the samurai and to limit their social mobility. Were they in need of spiritual stoicism due to their profession as Watts asserts? Undoubtedly. But they also needed to replace what they had deposed. Thus the patronage that the new military regime offered to Zen monasteries is indicative of a distinctly political motive. With this in mind the principles epitomized in sado seem conveniently timed; not art for arts sake, but imbued with and expressive of a distinctly revolutionary core during a time of social upheaval (Dumoulin 1990: 238). Sado promulgated a shift away from the older aesthetic. What had been outside or peripheral became the new symbolically charged aesthetic locus.

The way of tea served as the nexus for an entire network of interrelated and yet quite distinct art forms (Campbell 1962: 503). Imagine being invited to a tea ceremony. You walk through a rustic gateway into an immaculate garden arranged so as to encourage what Maquet (1971: 5) calls “aesthetic contemplation”. In this state the subject is “fully heedful... fully alive” to the object (Maquet 1971: 5). This concept is reminiscent of our earlier discussion of the principal of *do* in that it relies on sincere concentration, but not that of a cognitive or reductive sort. Like *do* it has a phenomenological quality of simply “being in the world” (Maquet 1971: 5). The garden then is situated in such a way as to evoke the harmonious interrelations of nature’s elements for observation and to heighten one’s awareness and concentration. While strolling through the relatively expansive and complex patterns of the outer

garden one is guided (so to speak) into a calm reflective state of mind. As one enters the inner garden there is a compression of the psyche and a constraint upon behavior (for example casual conversation, smoking). Kondo's (1985: 296) symbolic analysis of the tea ceremony highlights an "increase in symbolic intensity" as one proceeds.

There in the corner of the inner garden under a sculpted pine tree sits the tiny hut where the tea will be made and served. Its dimensions are frail, asymmetrical. The building materials are rustic and so plain as to blend unobtrusively into the background. A low portal of half the normal height forces guests to bow low as they enter a tiny reed matted room. The low doorway is a device for eliciting humility. Samurai would leave their swords outside along with their social status. All are equal while in this sacral space. It is dimly lit by light filtering through the pine needles whose silhouettes sway on the paper lining the unpolished wood of the sliding doors. An alcove in the facing wall holds the only bright color in the room, a simple yet poignantly placed flower arrangement at the base of a long scroll hanging on the wall with severe black brush strokes. The calligraphy on this scroll is a haiku suggesting an aspect of the garden visible through an adjacent open sliding door. The kimono clad tea master welcomes guests with a formal and dignified greeting. Guests then sit in such close proximity that their knees touch. Participants now fall silent. All communication is non-verbal and formalized. Auditory signals take on particular significance: the whisper of *tabi* socks, the murmur of kimono in motion, steam hissing from the cast iron pot on its coals in the center of the room, the rhythmic stirring of liquid. These are auditory agents of the medium furthering the compression process. From the time of entry into the garden one has been gradually eliding the superfluous. Visual patterns have become simpler, aural stimulus and vision restricted by the closeness and half-light of

the inner grove. This excludes extemporaneous thoughts as it invites mental quietude. And slowly, cup-by-cup tea is brewed and presented with precise graceful movements belying the studious discipline underneath. The ritualistic process alternates between accentuated pauses and rhythmic repetitions.

While the movements of both the tea master and the guests are highly proscribed, they are more than just elegant or controlled. In fact, the object is to “tune one’s whole being to a naturalness and freeness that transcend the formalities of prescribed movements” (Earhart 1982: 102). This is a common theme in Zen and in Zen infused art forms: discipline leads to freedom. Thus, it is not really about the appropriate way of holding one’s teacup. It is about being free to know the heat suffusing through its rough and uneven textures and to gain greater awareness of being in the moment. Finally, after drinking the frothy bitter green concoction the guests are invited to take note of and comment on the cups, the flower arrangement or the calligraphy in the alcove. While still in ritual time the peak of the ceremony is past and a gradual decompression of mental posture and etiquette begins. One has forgotten to whom one owes money, or where your car keys are, or what is for dinner. And that is the point, but not the only one.

The aim of my brief description is to demonstrate the variety of art forms that come to bear in a cup of tea. While simplistic, it serves to illustrate the reasons why Maquet (1971: 11) can assert that in feudal Japan “the tea ceremony was the center from which an aesthetic locus was outlined”. He defines an aesthetic locus as an “area of heightened aesthetic consciousness” (1971: 11). Suzuki (1959: 295) refers to this heightened awareness as a “psychosphere, or psychic atmosphere” and surmises that the way of tea is the way of cultivating an “inner field of consciousness”. This is ritual at its core. Participants have entered a space informed with symbolic references and ritual media. The

variety of separate and yet highly integrated art forms (gardening, architecture, textiles, flower arranging, calligraphy, poetry and pottery) identifies sado as a nexus composed of distinctive parts and also giving rise and meaning to those parts by way of its inclusion and utilization of them. In sum, sado is an aesthetic technology purposefully arranged to develop heightened consciousness in participants and also, for refined aesthetic expression in its initiates. The teahouse, then, serves as a locus in the literal sense, i.e. a physical space wherein aesthetic phenomena are fully attuned, but more importantly it is a ritual space saturated in symbolic suggestions. Kondo (1985: 295, 298) refers repeatedly to a symbolic continuum and asserts that for greater understanding of the ceremony, “one must focus on the central opposition of ritual v. mundane”. I believe she overemphasizes this dichotomy however. Granted she speaks of a continuum, but then goes on to reify the ritual and the mundane as opposites, asserting that the sequence of behavior and the relative quality of items used “create a symbolic cleavage between the ritual and the mundane.” (298). Yes, there is a process of induction, ritual climax and disengagement; a progression from less special to more special, but the point is not to engage with this potent and rarified ceremony and then to return to the everyday world. This is problematic because it elides the underlying Zen principles of wabi and do.

The unifying concept that links the various aesthetic media together is the aforementioned wabi. The discussion so far has provided examples in terms of color (earthy tones), elaboration (simplicity) and shape (asymmetry, imperfection). As for a definition, there are a wide variety of glosses. My discussions with Japanese people on the topic often elicit a similar response: “well... I can’t *tell* you what it means, but I know it when I see it.” Watts (1957) asserts that wabi is one of the untranslatable words that appear in Japanese philosophy. Still, he offers an insightful suggestion: “When the artist is feeling

depressed or sad, and in this peculiar emptiness of feeling catches a glimpse of something rather ordinary and unpretentious in its incredible ‘suchness,’ the mood is called wabi (Watts: 1957: 181). The haiku below, as found in Watts (1957: 185), seems to me to capture the feeling of unassuming and somber isolation within the vastness of being.

On a withered branch
A crow is perched,
In the autumn evening.

A haiku such as this might be displayed in the teahouse alcove. Its use of simple and commonplace imagery makes it accessible to all and yet hints indirectly at deeper principles, one of the most poignant being *mono no aware*, or the sigh of things. As Dumoulin (1990: 238) states “in the tea ceremony one encounters not the sacred but a spirituality in the midst of what is radically profane.”

Suzuki (1959: 296,271) narrows his interpretation of wabi down to an aesthetic appreciation of absolute poverty and identifies it as the value underlying the art of tea as an aesthetic of “primitive simplicity”. The use of the term poverty carries particular weight in light of my earlier presentation of the employment of Zen as a form of resistance to and rejection of the ostentatious wealth, glamour and corruption of earlier Buddhist sects (Earhart 1982: 43-49). It would have appealed to the desperate conditions of the peasantry as it helped them to make sense of their daily lives in the midst of civil war and social upheaval. An emphasis on rustic simplicity and practicality over theoretical speculation served as the lynchpin of an ideology that sought to devalue entrenched aesthetics (Dumoulin 1990: 239, Bellah 1957: 17). The way of tea has even been called “the creation of layman’s Zen “ (Hisamatsu in Dumoulin 1990: 238). Thus, some of “what had hitherto been regarded as positive values turned negative while what had been negative became positive” (Izutsu and

Izutsu 1981: 46).

It is important to clarify that these value shifts (even reversals) were not only in terms of artistic sense and production, but also influenced lifestyle. So, yes, the cliché that art imitates life is accurate, but incomplete. A broader understanding allows us to see a more dynamic process linking art and life. Each inflects and contributes in a productive exchange of values. What was peripheral can become core to the aesthetic and social locus and the core values can be rejected and relegated to the periphery. Sherry Ortner (1973: 1339) emphasizes that a symbol is a “vehicle of meaning” and that anything can be a symbol. Cultivating a mindset that perceives the suchness of the ordinary allows one to experience with awe the very fact of being. Thus all things, all moments become meaningful. Since meaning is that by which people make sense of their lives, it follows that images and objects that express wabi are highly symbolic. Serving tea exemplifies an idealized approach to living as illustrated in its emphasis on being “watchful, considerate, gentle-mannered, sincere” (Suzuki 1959: 271, 277). These behaviors are still highly valued in modern Japan and help explain why sado still holds a revered status. Serving tea, then, is an artistic performance that enacts culturally approved categories of behavior. Ortner (1973: 1341) refers to such performances as “key scenarios” and explains that these scenarios illustrate idealized goals and enact the means for achieving those goals. The similarity to Maquet’s aesthetic locus and to Bellah’s clusters of cultural values is apparent, but Ortner’s emphasis is on behavior. And behavior is where the *do* aspect comes in with its emphasis on sincerity, mindfulness and commitment. Appropriate behaviors like those Suzuki cited can be thought of then as aesthetic behaviors when informed with *do*. They are suited, literally “per-form”; to a culturally approved and valued form. Girls in particular are encouraged to join extracurricular sado clubs at

an early age. By learning to perform with consideration and grace through the tea ceremony they inculcate social values that will stand them in good stead in broader social interactions. Thus the goal of manifesting behaviors free from friction with one's surroundings can be cultivated through sincere and focused attention to the four moral principles that Suzuki provided above.

This brings us back to the issue of Kondo's dichotomy: ritual v. mundane. With wabi as our aesthetic reference to physical media and do as our principle for appropriate engagement with these media, i.e. behavior, I believe the mundane is transmuted. The profane becomes the sacred. The blossom in the alcove that will wilt tomorrow, the onset of autumn, the evanescence of steaming tea leaving moisture on one's cheek, the bitterness of tea foam... the suchness of these fleeting beauties cultivate an awareness of the sigh of things. But, as with other Zen arts like the aforementioned judo, or shodo these are not meant to cultivate proficiency (a mere by-product) or even Maquet's contemplative mindset within the confines of a liminal or ritual space. Rather, the goal is complete intuitive and harmonious engagement with right here, right now. The "way" nuance of do is that it is a life-long path, based on the principle of Zen in motion, so to speak. It inflects all aspects of one's life. Maintaining a meditative awareness of here and now while performing any task and participating fully in the suchness of this never-to-come-again moment -- that is the goal. Thus not a brief interaction with the sacred followed by a return to the profane, but a realization that these are only perspectives. Thereby one realizes that the "profane" is intensely sacred.

An interesting relational dynamic comes to light through this consideration of the moral sense of the way of tea. The perception and production of something characteristic of wabi (whether an object or a behavior) is a highly personal experience relative to the individual's state of consciousness. However, the

means of developing heightened consciousness and maintaining it beyond the teahouse as epitomized by the concept of *do* (way), are immanently social and interactive. Thus, even today there is within the way of tea a potent fusion of aesthetics with moral and spiritual principles via Zen (Suzuki 1959: 288, Dumoulin 1990: 238). It is an art that reveres harmony and calm serenity as essential cultural values alongside a more important spiritual message: be fully here, take joy in the mundane. Allow awe to arise within you from a momentary sip of bitter tea... that remains the elusive draw of this ancient art. And too, this links us to the message in the haiku cited by Watts above. We are encouraged to recognize that each of us is like the isolated crow silhouetted in the chill of an encroaching darkness and that each equally deserves compassion.

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