
Early History of Tea

Reliance on China

Tea did not grow in Japan until the first seeds were brought from China during the T'ang dynasty (618–907), when cultural interchange between the two countries reached a peak. The first mention of a formal ceremony involving the drinking of tea is found in the eighth century, when Emperor Shōmu (reign, 724–49) is reported to have invited the monks who had participated in one of his religious services to take tea in his palace.¹

At about the same time in China (760), a Buddhist priest by the name of Lu Wu completed the first book on tea called *Cha Ching*, which outlined all the rules for the correct method of making tea, such as the temperature of the hot water and the proper use of tea vessels. It was largely through the influence of this classic that the form and style of today's tea ceremony evolved in Japan.

During the Nara period (710–94) tea plants were grown in the grounds of some temples in Japan and tea served priests and noblemen as a medicinal beverage. As tea was not imported in large quantities from China and was not grown extensively in Japan, it came to be regarded as a luxury commodity beyond the reach of the general populace. Its general appeal was further restricted when relations between the two countries deteriorated toward the end of the T'ang dynasty, and the evolution of tea from medicine to beverage in China was not transmitted to Japan until much later on. At the same time, Japan, which had been imitating the more sophisticated culture of China, was now forced to mold its own traditions and foster its own culture.

One outcome of this new development can be seen in the way in which Buddhism in Japan took a different approach from Chinese Buddhism and crystallized into a purely Japanese religion. Similarly, the Japanese nobility began to create new pastimes built around aesthetic appreciation in the fields of art and calligraphy. As no records were kept of the Chinese custom of tea-drinking, the beverage remained virtually

Chinese calligrapher who worked under the Sung emperor Jen Tsung (1023–64). His book called *Ch'a Lu*, written in 1053, referred to the manufacture of powdered tea, the forerunner of the green tea that was incorporated into the tea ceremony in Japan. Another Sung emperor, Hui Tsung, referred to the bamboo whisk used to whisk the tea after water was poured over it in his book *Ta Kuan Ch'a Lun*, or *A General View of Tea*. These were the first two imports from China that formed the basis of the tea ceremony as we know it in Japan today.

Eisai aroused a great deal of hostility among the monks who disliked the new religious ideas he had imported, but he succeeded in enlisting the protection of the Kamakura shogunate, whose members were among his earliest converts. In January 1211 he wrote the first treatise on tea in Japan, *Kissa Yōjōki*, or *Tea-Drinking Is Good for the Health*, a small booklet of twenty pages in praise of tea. In his short treatise, Eisai strongly recommended tea as a cure for five types of disease: loss of appetite, paralysis, boils, beriberi, and sickness from tainted water. Tea, he added, is a remedy for all disorders, and this was perhaps the main reason for the consequent popularity of tea-drinking.

The priests were also among the first to appreciate tea as a beverage, especially Myōe of the Kōzan-ji temple in Toganoo. Myōe was said to have been given some tea seeds by Eisai, and the cultivation of tea became a part of Myōe's religious life. He produced excellent crops from those first seeds in Fukase, and it is said that the tea produced there today originates from the plantations of Myōe.

By the thirteenth century, tea was being cultivated in the Uji district, and tea plantations spread to various parts of Japan to meet the growing demand for tea. The number of tea drinkers increased rapidly, especially among the upstart samurai. This warrior class, which was beginning to seek a legal basis of government to counteract the aristocratic regime in Kyoto, turned eagerly to everything offered by the Sung dynasty: legal and political systems, religion, and, naturally, tea. It is quite probable that,

number of cups increased to twenty, thirty, fifty, and seventy, until it reached one hundred cups per person. A tea party in which fifty or sixty cups of tea were served in a ceremonial manner took a long time, so a banquet including the serving of liquor was held, and tea was drunk between courses. It was not unusual for such a party to last from early morning until far into the night.

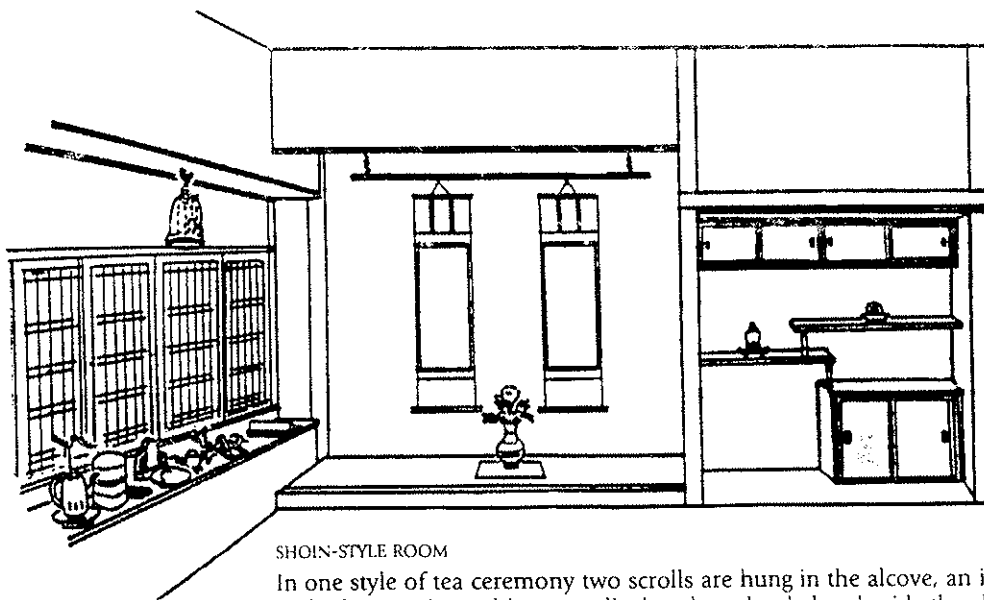
It is unknown what procedures were followed in the drinking of the tea, but most probably cups were passed from one guest to the next. If there were a great number of people present it would have been impossible to serve tea in individual cups: for instance in a gathering of sixty-three people, if each guest drank fifty cups, it would have required 3,150 cups to entertain all of them. The technique of passing around one cup seems to have originated in these huge feasts, and probably explains why only one bowl is used in today's tea ceremony.

Another activity in which one object was shared among many participants was ceremonial incense-smelling, a popular recreation among court nobles. In this type of game the participants sampled four different kinds of incense, ten times each. The average number of guests was usually ten, and they would pass one incense burner among them. If more than one incense burner was used, the smell could vary according to the level of heat in the different burners.

This habit of sharing might seem odd today, but it stems from the samurai class, which had strong family ties, and when they gathered on important occasions it was the custom for the lord to take the first sip of saké from a large cup and pass it among his retainers as a reaffirmation of their close bonds.

Tea and the Ashikaga Family

Soon after the commencement of the civil war, Ashikaga Takauji (reign, 1338–58) became the first shogun of the Northern court. The Tenryū-ji temple at Saga, near Kyoto, was built by him in 1339 to commemorate



SHOIN-STYLE ROOM

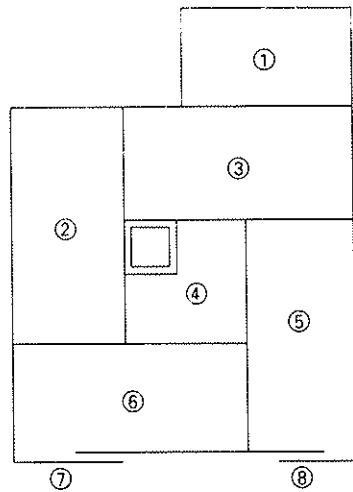
In one style of tea ceremony two scrolls are hung in the alcove, an incense burner and other precious objects are displayed on the shelves beside the alcove, and several of the utensils used for making tea are laid out on the ledge under the window.

room were Chinese paintings and scrolls, and the guests relaxed with ten bowls each of four different kinds of tea.

It was the custom in those days to decorate homes and moon-viewing arbors with Chinese art, since the Kamakura culture was strongly under the influence of the Sung and Yuan dynasties. The priests who traveled between China and Japan frequently brought back important works of art with them, which they later displayed in their temples. The influence was to spread even further during the Muromachi period (1392-1573), when trade was intensified between Japan and Ming-dynasty China. In a record of the Enkaku-ji temple of Kamakura written in 1363 (*Butsunichian Kōbutsu Mokuroku*), there is a list of its Chinese possessions, which included twenty paintings by the famous Zen painters Mu-chi⁶ and Yujian. In addition, the Ashikaga shogun's *Lists of Treasures and Paintings* (*Kundaikan Sōchōki*) also mention a great number of Chinese art objects that formed part of Japanese collections.

Japanese architecture of the Muromachi period was transformed from the formal palace style of the Heian period to a simplified samurai style, and then into the *shoin* style, which incorporated elements of temple architecture. *Shoin* details were adopted for the design of tea ceremony rooms: the alcove (*tokonoma*), for instance, developed from the decorative platform set in front of the Buddhist scroll in a noble's bedchamber, the pair of shelves (*chigaidana*) in the side of the alcove was formerly used to display precious ornaments, while the side alcove (*tsuke-shoin*) had a desk. The floor of these rooms was covered with tatami mats, in the *shoin* style.

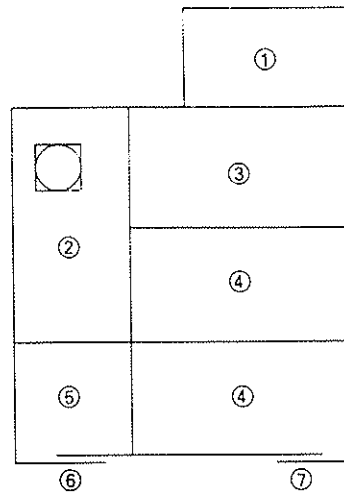
Originally, the *shoin* room served as a study/drawing room, where



TEA ROOM WITH FIRE PIT

Layout of the tea room in the colder months when the fire pit (*ro*) is in use.

1. Alcove (*toko*). 2. Host's mat (*temae-datami*). 3. Distinguished guests' mat (*kinin-datami*). 4. Mat containing the fire pit (*ro-datami*). 5. Guests' mat (*kyakudatami*). 6. Entry mat (*fumikomi-datami*). 7. Host's entrance (*sadōguchi*). 8. Guests' entrance (*nijiriguchi*).



TEA ROOM WITH BRAZIER

Layout of tea room in the warmer months when the fire pit is covered up and a portable brazier is used instead.

1. Alcove (*toko*). 2. Host's mat (*temae-datami*). 3. Distinguished guests' mat (*kinin-datami*). 4. Guests' mats (*kyakudatami*). 5. Entry mat (*fumikomi-datami*). 6. Host's entrance (*sadōguchi*). 7. Guests' entrance (*nijiriguchi*).

less formal. These small rooms were actually the corners of large rooms partitioned off by a screen, or *kakoi*, and later on, when smaller rooms were built specially for this purpose, they themselves became known as *kakoi*.

One of the best designers of smaller tea rooms was a Zen priest by the name of Murata Shukō (1422–1502), known as the father of the tea ceremony, for the spirit and etiquette of tea were originated by him. His actual existence had been called into question, but new data has since been found that throws some light on his life.

Shukō was born in Nara and entered the priesthood at Shōmyō-ji temple at the age of eleven. When he was twenty he left the temple, only to return again ten years later to enter the priesthood. He practiced Zen meditation under the monk and teacher Ikkyū Sōjun at Daitoku-ji temple in Kyoto. Shortly after he began his studies, he distinguished himself with his understanding of Zen, and was presented with a diploma signed by the Chinese monk Yuanwu. It is said that he hung the scroll of writing on the wall of his tea room in Nara and spent the rest of his days perfecting the tea ceremony as well as giving lessons to those who were interested in learning the art. From writings on Shukō, we can gain an insight into how passionately he tried to instill in his students the true spirit of simple, Zen-inspired tea.

chanoyu was used to describe a tea gathering where the host himself served tea for a small party of friends.

When the tea culture reached the peak of its popularity toward the end of the Muromachi period, tea devotees were given different titles to distinguish their relation to the art. *Chanoyusha* was the name given to a professional teacher of the tea ceremony like Shukō. A *wabi-suki* was a teacher distinguished by three particular qualities: faith in the performance of tea, an ability to act with decorum befitting a proper master, and excellent practical skills. Finally, the *meijin* not only met all the qualifications of the *wabi-suki*, but was a collector of fine Chinese tea utensils as well.