

CHASHITSU – THE JAPANESE TEAHOUSE: AN AESTHETIC SYSTEM

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- (2010) *Wahlselfbilder: Inszenierung kultureller Identität in Japan und Österreich* [Chosen Self-images: Staging Cultural Identity in Japan and Austria], *Journal of European Studies*, special edition, 69-81

Abstract: *The Japanese teahouse (chashitsu) developed its classic form in the 16th century A.D. and has since retained its position as a nucleus of Japanese culture. Despite its century-old history, numerous contemporary architects consider it one of the most important contributions to Japanese architecture and have reinterpreted it in theory and praxis in various different forms. The characterization of the related tea ceremony (chadô) varies from “ritual” to “consciousness training”, “performance” or even “total work of art” (Gesamtkunstwerk). This investigation approaches the topic from its ritual and aesthetic background through the medium of systems theory and demonstrates that the teahouse – whether traditional or contemporary – pursues the objective of establishing a multisensual aesthetic system, uniting the participants in a strictly calculated, yet harmonious space-time-microcosm.*

1 INTRODUCTION - TEA IN JAPAN

Drinking tea has a long and varied history in Japan. Since its first introduction in the 8th century A.D., tea has fulfilled various different functions – from medical purposes and simple enjoyment to tea gatherings and lavish parties with tea tasting competitions for high-class warriors (*samurai*) and noblemen. These events usually took place either in luxuriously decorated “*shoin*”-residences or in elegant gardens, while later it became usual to provide specific ostentatious tearooms within the building complexes for this popular pastime.

However, as tea was first introduced mainly by scholars and monks, who brought it to Japan from their study tours to China, it also had a strongly spiritual and religious connotation and was used e.g. as a stimulant for monks during long meditations. Especially the Buddhist sect of Rinzai-Zen became influential regarding the development of a new, more modest and subtle style of tea gatherings.

2 CHADÔ – THE WAY OF TEA AS AN AISTHOSPHERE

The ultimate goal of Zen Buddhism is to attain “*satori*” or enlightenment. As this aim should be accessible to everyone, there are various quite pragmatic ways to its achievement. Apart from *zazen* meditation and the study of “*koans*” (often irrational or perplexing phrases, meant to overcome logical thinking), basically any action can be regarded as a path to enlightenment, provided that it is carried out with utmost care and concentration. Many of these practices are well known also in Western countries, such as the martial arts of *judô*, *kendô* and *aikidô* or the fine arts like *kadô* (better known as *ikebana* – the art of flower arrangement) and *shodô* (calligraphy). The suffix “-*dô*” means “way” or “path”, indicating the nature of these activities as an approach to enlightenment. In this sense, also the habit of tea gatherings was established as a spiritual exercise with precisely defined rules and became known as “*chadô*” or “the way of tea”.

But what was the specific quality of the tea ceremony that distinguished it from an ordinary tea gathering? The answer given by Sen no Rikyû, who perfected the tea ceremony in the 16th century to today’s classical form, might seem puzzling:

„The tea ceremony is nothing more than boiling water, making tea and drinking it.“
(Tokunaga, 2004, pp. 63)

However, the clue is to be found within the statement: “*nothing more*” indicates that the importance lies in the manner of execution, as the tea ceremony should be carried out focusing only on the activity, without any deviation or distraction by outside factors. It is this kind of intensive attention on even the most ordinary and common actions that qualifies the tea ceremony as a spiritual exercise. Thus, the true challenge is to attain the according mind set, as D.T. Suzuki explains in his book on “Zen and Japanese culture”:

“The tea-drinking [...] is not just drinking tea, but it is the art of cultivating what might be called “psychosphere” or the psychic atmosphere, or the inner field of consciousness.” (Suzuki, 1959, pp. 295-6)

The establishment of this kind of “psychic atmosphere” with a specific intended effect on the mind of the participants requires the considerate combination of all sensual factors to a harmoniously operating aesthetic system, or an “aisthosphere” (from *aísthēsis* – Greek: perception, sensation). The essential characteristic of the aisthosphere is its synesthetic quality, meaning the simultaneous co-operation of all senses, resulting in a coherent, permeating sensual experience.

The guideline for the composition of this “total work of art” is set by a theme assigned to each tea gathering relating e.g. to a particular seasonal event (like *hanami* – viewing of the cherry blossoms, or *momiji* – viewing of the autumnal foliage), a tea-related event (e.g. tasting of the first new tea, acquirement of a new tea utensil) or any other topic that might be deemed suitable. This topic acts as a selection criterion for the sensual stimuli, which are chosen to support and enhance the respective theme. Examples for appropriate occasions as well as “ingredients” for the desired aisthosphere including poetry, calligraphy, flowers (*chabana* – tea flowers), dishes, food, even certain materials, colors, scents and seasonal words (*keigo*) can be found in according almanacs for tea masters (cf. Sanmi, 2002).

3 CHASHITSU – THE TEAHOUSE AS AN IMMERSIVE SPACE

Keeping the above in mind, the role of the teahouse for the ritual becomes much clearer: it works as a tool, providing the spatial framework for the arrangement of the desired aisthosphere, comparable to a stage setting.

“With the *soan* tea room, tea coalesces into a single coherent work of art. Architecture and art objects and human form – all three are subsumed under a single aesthetic into a unique art form.” (Fujimori, 2007, p.13)

The teahouse as a kind of stage connects all art forms with the human participants, who simultaneously personify both actors and audience in this spiritual performance. The rules of interaction are given through a strict code of behavior, the so-called “*tatemaie*”, which regulates not only the course of action and the movements of the host, but also the hierarchy of guests, their clothing and communication. (Doi, 2001, p.35)

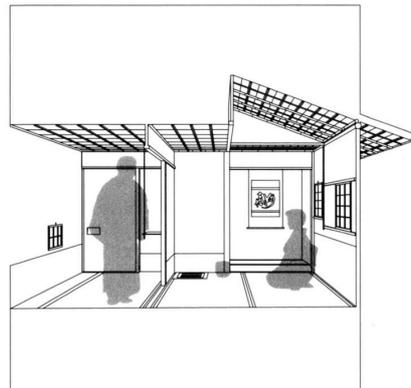


Figure 1: Interior of the 16th century teahouse “Taian” built by Sen no Rikyū (after Fehrer 2005, p. 152)

Through this rigorous set of directives, the attendants not only *take* part in the ritual, but *become* an integral part of it, embedded in the established aesthetic system. This kind of choreography ensures the synchronization and harmonization of all elements in an exemplary microcosmic order.

Furthermore, the teahouse in combination with the behavioral guidelines supports the unobstructed concentration on the spiritual exercise, as required by the concept of Zen Buddhism. The strictly introverted teahouse offers only a minimum of openings, which are mostly covered by translucent paper screens (*shoji*), in order to admit only muted, hazy light to the inside, avoiding any distraction by outside views. The calm atmosphere and regulated course of events ensure a smooth and focused procedure, successively drawing all of the participants' attention.

This process can lead to the so-called phenomenon of "flow", which has been studied in connection with different kinds of activities such as dancing, climbing, reading, computer games, but also meditation and spiritual rituals. While these activities are very different on the surface, they share a common property, namely the possibility of total mental immersion leading to oblivion of both surroundings and self-perception. This is often described as a feeling of "dissolvment" or "flow". (cf. Csikszentmihályi, 2008).

The comparison with Buddhist texts suggests a strong similarity between this experience and the one of enlightenment (*satori*), which aims at dissolving the boundaries between the subjective self and the surrounding world in order to achieve unity with the universe.

In this regard, the teahouse can be seen as a tool which facilitates the setup of the mental prerequisites for the experience of *flow* or *satori* respectively. However, there lies an interesting twist within this realization: a tool is useful only as long as it is needed for the accomplishment of a task - if the exercise is successfully mastered, it becomes dispensable. Thus, the teahouse fulfills a paradox role. Its ultimate goal is its own redundancy.

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