Hannah Shaneberger
Professor Segal
HST 201 Sec. 009
11/14/2014

The Way of the Tea

Normally, when people think of Japan they think of many different cultural and historical aspects of the country, such as, samurai warriors, anime cartoon characters, traditional clothing and accessories like kimonos, fans, and getas, beautiful geisha women, food like sushi, and probably tea as well. Tea is thought of as a very traditional drink in Japan, as well as, a symbol representing the nation as a whole through the practice of tea ceremony, or chanoyu, as it is called. The practice of chanoyu—and the start of it's national popularity—can date back to medieval Japan starting in the late fourteenth century, and still plays a major part in today's society as well. Over this vast period of time, chanoyu has had many different groups of practitioners whom have shifted, changed, and grown over time, and have modified the art of chanoyu within their different groups and have made chanoyu what it is today. During the medieval time of Japan, warrior elites and merchants made up a significant amount of chanoyu practitioners, while in the modern age, women have come to take over the art form in terms of numbers. The shifting of all these different groups practicing chanoyu can show the popularity and significance of it, and also the exclusiveness of it as a cultural practice. Although the practice of tea ceremonies in Japan are seen and thought of to be a national symbol and identity for the country as a whole, we can look to the past and present as a way of displaying the different segregations of social class groups over time and their specific practices of chanoyu, during the medieval period, as well as the ushering in and establishment of women in chanoyu during the modern age, and how the inequality of

gender and class still exists today, denoting the concept of chanoyu as having ever been or being a true national identity for all.

"Warrior leaders contributed both to the perpetuation of classical court culture and to the expansion of culture-art into important new realms,"[1] such as chanoyu. Warrior elites were of one group during the medieval period that practiced chanoyu and made it a ritual of their own. The starts of the warrior elite class's tea ceremonies were known as tea judging parties. They would often take place in the military lord's residence, where he would bring in guests and first have sake and food served. The guest would then migrate to the building's second floor and enter into an elegantly decorated room that had many Chinese artifacts, and they would then sit down in chairs while the host's son served dessert type horderves until another server came out with tea. The server would, "with a kettle of hot water in his left hand and a tea whisk in his right moved from guest to guest in order of rank preparing tea." To conclude the ceremony, the guests would have more sake and partake in a tea-judging contest.[2]

Then starting in the late fourteenth century and early fifteenth century warrior culture started to become "restrained and controlled" and the "wild" early tea-judging parties that use to take place, "transformed into the 'way of the tea.'"[3] Warrior elites then, at the start of the fifteenth century, started to display their power and wealth in terms of cultural activities, like chanoyu, in the capital city of Kyoto. "These men hosted lavish gatherings, where participants collaborated in such social arts as linked verse (renga)

---

[1] H. Paul Varley, "Cultural Life of the Warrior Elite in Fourteenth Century," In *The Origins of Japan's Medieval World*, ed. Jeffrey P. Mass, (Standford: Standford University Press, 1997,) 196.

[2] Dale Slusser, "The Transformation of Tea Practice in Sixteenth-Century Japan," In *Japanese Tea Culture: Art, History, and Practice*, ed. Morgan Pitelka, (London & New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003,) 41.

[3] Varley, "Cultural Life of the Warrior Elite," 196.

poetry and games of object matching (monoawase), while enjoying food and liberation amid elaborate displays of Chinese art objects."[4] When these warriors held their tea ceremonies, they often had them in specially constructed banquet type rooms—implying that it was a large group of men. These rooms were also decorated with various goods from China, such as, paintings, scripts, ceramics, and tea ware. This practice of holding tea ceremonies helped to assimilate warrior elites into the culture of the capital at the time.

By the late fifteenth century, the warrior elites practice of tea preparation became much more complex and was more of a procedure. It is thought that these new set of tea preparation rules came from the Chinese. The tea specialist that would attend the warrior elites ceremonies would now have duties, such as, "instructing others in the proper procedures to drink tea and handle the utensils."[5]

During the late sixteenth century, samurai and warlord, Oda Nobunaga, had gained military control and he continued this position of strength through his collection of famous tea objects, as well as, buying, selling, and receiving tea ware and utensils which became a mean of maintaining power.[6] The collection of power by Nobunaga, the order of being served tea, and the holding of tea ceremonies in the capital of Kyoto shows just how influential tea was to the military elite during the time in regards of asserting and maintaining power and status. Tea practice by the warrior elite "reinforced a hierarchical definition of society in which the warrior leaders were distinguished by their

---

[4] Slusser, "The Transformation of Tea Practice," 40.
[5] Slusser, "The Transformation of Tea Practice," 41.
[6] Sulsser, "The Transformation of Tea Practice," 48-49.

wealth and power"[7] which started the beginning of inequality in the practice of chanoyu—as well as, a fight for social class dominance in the times of medieval Japan.

During the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, the wealthy merchant class began to make their way into the chanoyu culture, and even modify it to make it more their own. "The merchants' wealth and corresponding power made it possible for them to practice tea; now they were attempting to change the contour of the field to express their social position and interests."[8] This tells us that in order to practice tea ceremonies you had to have a certain amount of social and class power, as well as, good monetary standings—which is in part due to the pieces of utensils and tea ware needed to carry out tea ceremonies. We can also take away that these upper class groups felt as though they needed to separate their practices of chanoyu in order to involve their group's interests and set themselves apart from other classes and even compete with the other classes creating power dynamics and a competition for who sits at the top.

Although there was little room to modify the field of chanoyu, merchants ended up finding a way to adjust the practice by "mixing a few pieces of native poetry into the ritual" and "relating tea practice to other established art forms" paired with domestically produced ceramics being used along side the former Chinese ceramics, "In promoting this new ideal, elite merchant tea practitioners were also trying to monopolize the power to consecrate objects for themselves."[9] All of this new adaptation of introducing other art forms and using Japanese utensils within chanoyu is said to be a way of the merchants trying to gain prestige and establish themselves within the field of tea ceremonies.

---

[7] Sulsser, "The Transformation of Tea Practice," 45.
[8] Sulsser, "The Transformation of Tea Practice," 44.
[9] Sulsser, "The Transformation of Tea Practice," 44.

On top of those additions, merchants also created "the new grass-hut mode of tea culture" which actually functioned as if it was an elite club for certain individuals. "Entrance into the practice of grass-hut tea was limited to those few who could obtain the necessary ritual objects, while more importantly, unlike banquet-room tea, full participation required that the movements of the ritual itself be learned so that the rite could be preformed before others." [10] This grass-hut way of tea culture was a way to gain control within chanoyu, but it also had a goal of trying to simplify where they practiced it and reduce the size of practitioners participating in the ceremonies at one time. The change in the architecture of the where chanoyu was to take place was one of the biggest differences in merchant style compared to warrior style. Instead of a banquet room, merchants practiced in rooms of simple construction, which were often "set alone in a garden at the back of the house."[11]

The wealthy merchant class used this way of additional art forms during ceremonies, the use of both Chinese and Japanese ceramics and utensils, the formation of the grass-hut way, and the change of architecture of the gathering places in tea culture at the time greatly in gaining their social class more prestige than previously had, as well as, a way of making the ritual and practice of chanoyu something of their own. It also helped separate them from other social groups, which also helped to increase the inequality of the chanoyu culture during the medieval period.

Shifting away from medieval Japan and looking towards contemporary times, we see yet another group taking over the practice of chanoyu. Today women make up the majority of chanoyu practitioners in Japan and dominating the numbers in attendants at

---

[10] Sulsser, "The Transformation of Tea Practice," 45.
[11] Sulsser, "The Transformation of Tea Practice," 46.

tea ceremony schools. This very masculine activity that was dominated my men during the medieval period, has now become—in many peoples eyes—a very feminine ritual to partake in nowadays. So, how did this shift and new group of chanoyu practitioners come to be?

Around the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, some court women were introduced to chanoyu through their husbands. It was not uncommon for some women who were the wives of grand masters to assist their husbands in their home in preparing for the tea ceremonies in regards to cooking and clean, hence, women retaining some aspects of the ceremonies. However, they were not permitted to publicly preform, or teach anything that they had learned until around the nineteenth century.[12]

It is said that two major events have greatly affected the development of women partaking in chanoyu. The first being, during the time of the Meiji Restoration, "Under the new leadership of the heads of the two major Sen schools of chado (Omotesenke and Urasenke), the traditional arts came to be seen as a means by which the new rulers could spread to the newly made nationals of Japan the values of loyalty and service to the emperor".[13] This then opened up the study and practicing of chanoyu to some new social classes that were previously excluded from the learning of the ceremonies. Within these new social classes were women, whom redefined chanoyu as, "part of the role of mothers in raising future generations."[14] The participation of women expanded even further in 1894 when, Ennosai—XIII Urasenke grand master—allowed women the opportunity to

[12] Barbara Lynne Rowland Mori, "The Tea Ceremony: A Transformed Japanese Ritual," *Gender and Society*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (Sage Publications, Inc., 1991), 87.

[13] Mori, "The Tea Ceremony," 88.

[14] Mori, "The Tea Ceremony," 88.

become certified to professionally teach chanoyu.[15] However, mostly upper-class women partook in this new found profession—often times as a way to earn money in a way that did not interfere with family life, nor "undermining the relationship between husband and wife."[16] In time, the studying of chanoyu for young women under female teachers was thought to be a form of "training for marriage."[17] With time, it then became a necessity for most upper class and middle-class women to know the art of chanoyu before their wedding day so they could be ready for married life, but it also became a rite of passage in a way for young women.

The after math of World War II also contributed to the participation of women in the art of chanoyu. Preceding the war, Japan had to redefine chanoyu in its society—after it's fall during the war due to a lacking economy. In order to enrich the cultural tradition of tea ceremonies, women were greatly encouraged to partake, and by the 1960s—when the economy improved—chanoyu was yet again a luxurious Japanese activity. Although in the sixties chanoyu was suppose to be intended financially for the wealthier classes, the increase in economic growth did blur the defined lines between the privileged and non-privileged. A shift to appeal to all women also began to appear during the sixties and seventies. Department stores started displaying chanoyu floor plans in order to promote the "traditional/high culture by commercializing it."[18] With help from the postwar period economics many non-privileged women were able to buy into the tea ceremony culture. They could now obtain the utensils and other artistic objects, but most importantly have access to the knowledge behind chanoyu as well. "[…] They obtained access to the

---

15 Mori, "The Tea Ceremony," 88.
16 Mori, "The Tea Ceremony," 88.
17 Mori, "The Tea Ceremony," 88.
18 Etsuko Kato, *The Tea Ceremony and Women's Empowerment in Modern Japan*, (London & New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004,) 86-87.

knowledge behind these objects as well, including anecdotes of historical figures and events, which were necessary for the proper use of the objects."[19]

It seemed that women from different socio-economic classes were now able to join this previously exclusive boys club, yet still today women face forms of gender equality within the tea ceremony culture. In some chanoyu schools, certain rituals of tea ceremony are secret and blatantly said, and known to be rituals forbidden for women to know.[20] Women also, are unable to be at the top of chanoyu school's hierarchy of positions, "women are found in all positions except the top three."[21] Many attribute this inability to rise to the top being because women are not able to be adequate mothers and wives if they are in positions of higher power or greater responsibility, which we know is completely untrue and fairly sexist, yet it is still an issue within tea culture. Women experience a type of glass-ceiling in this culture still even after centuries of chanoyu growing and developing.

The practice and practitioners of chanoyu has come quite a long way since its starting origins. Though the reoccurring and problematic aspect that should still be in question is its identification as a national symbol or type of identity for the Japanese nation. We can see throughout its history how very exclusive the practice of tea ceremony was, you were either born into the right social class or you weren't. Even if born within the right social class you had to practice with that class, and in the manner in which they practiced. Although as time as time has gone on, we did see a great shift allowing women practitioners, and even women outside of the upper class, there

---

[19] Kato, *The Tea Ceremony and Women's Empowerment in Modern Japan*, 89.
[20] Mori, "The Tea Ceremony," 87.
[21] Mori, "The Tea Ceremony," 91.

continues to be inequality and segregation between practicing people. Women still cannot hold high positions, and still with held certain information for practicing chanoyu. Also, we still see chanoyu being practiced today by upper and middle social classes, so it remains to be a practice done by those whom seem to have sufficient financial funds. So how can a practice—although very traditional—that has a history of limiting and segregating its practitioners, be so well regarded and that is said to be a symbol that represents all of the country? With its member inequality and division, it does quite the opposite in regards to being a national identity. Chanoyu is an art and a practice that is intended, and has been intended for only certain social classes in Japan, making it a very far from adequate symbol of the Japanese nation. If the majority of the populous is not included or intentionally excluded from a practice then it should in no way be deemed an art or activity that can be said to define certain aspects of a nation.

From the medieval period to the contemporary times, chanoyu has remained a very influential and highly regarded art form throughout Japan. The shift of the culture's dominant practitioners from the warrior elite, to wealthy merchants, and the modern day women shows the great progression and development it has made. Although the development of this art of chanoyu has been grand, it still lacks the aspects it needs to make it a true national identity.

Bibliography

Kato, Etsuko. *The Tea Ceremony and Women's Empowerment in Modern Japan*, (London & New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004,).

Mori, Barbara Lynne Rowland. "The Tea Ceremony: A Transformed Japanese Ritual," *Gender and Society*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (Sage Publications, Inc., 1991).

Slusser, Dale. "The Transformation of Tea Practice in Sixteenth-Century Japan," In *Japanese Tea Culture: Art, History, and Practice*, ed. Morgan Pitelka, (London & New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003,).

Varley, H. Paul. "Cultural Life of the Warrior Elite in Fourteenth Century," In *The Origins of Japan's Medieval World*, ed. Jeffrey P. Mass, (Standford: Standford University Press, 1997,).