

**Book Review: The Book of Tea By Kakuzo Okakura.  
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Japanese people who love to live in Cambodia tend to admire Khmer culture and people. However, in their body and mind, Japanese people strongly adhere to their own culture from birth. A book has been written demonstrating what this culture is. Its name is “*The Book of Tea*”. Author, Kakuzo Okakura originally wrote “*The Book of Tea*” to a Western audience in the English language in the early 20th century. Okakura, who was Japanese first published his book in 1906 in New York. It was also published in Sweden, Germany, France and Spain. In 1929, the book was translated to Japanese and has since been republished 118 times. Tea is the title of the book, but it is not about only tea. In the book, Okakura explains the term “*Teaism*”, which refers to the influence of tea in many aspects of Japanese culture, ways of thinking, and life. While it was first published long ago, the ideas of the book have not dated. Many Japanese read and understand the analysis of the author as it relates to situations in Japan in 2020.

The book became accessible to an international audience as Okakura was born into the family of a foreign trade merchant and studied English from a young age. He specialized in the visual arts and focused especially on Japanese art. The more he studied foreign culture, the more he grasped the importance of the culture in his own country. The content of the book highlights Japan's unique aesthetic sense and world-view, condensed into a cup of tea. This dense book approaches the essence of what good sense is and what beautiful means for Japanese people. It comprises seven chapters. In the first chapter, Okakura introduces various aspects of Japanese culture, starting with the tea ceremony. From Chapter 2 to Chapter 6, Okakura explains all things that link tea to Japanese culture, such as Taoism, the tea room, and flowers. In the final chapter, he introduces the idea of true beauty for Japanese people through the stories of tea-masters and their lives.

Chapter 1 gives a taste of all essences of this book. Okakura argued that the substance of various cultures in the world is condensed in tea. *“Tea began as a medicine and grew into a beverage”* in China. In the 8th century, tea was created as a kind of art and in the 15th century, it came to Japan. There it was elevated to the religion of worship and beauty called the tea ceremony, which became a respectable ritual in Japanese daily life.

The essence of the tea ceremony is the worship of imperfection and the acceptance of the fact that things are not perfect. The ceremony is a gentle attempt to find something possible, even in the midst of a life destined for the impossible. The ceremony is more than just a ceremony. First, it is a kind of philosophy; however, *“the Philosophy of Tea is not mere aestheticism in the ordinary acceptance of the term”*. Rather, it connects us with a theory or

a religion that informs us about various perspectives on humanity and nature. Second, the tea ceremony connects us to *“hygiene, for it enforces cleanliness”*. Third, the tea ceremony connects us to *“economics, for it shows comfort in simplicity rather than in the complex and costly”*. Moreover, the tea ceremony connects us with a *“moral geometry”* of mind as it provides meaning, which enables the development of a sense of balance with the universe. Okakura explained the same concepts in another book called *“The Ideals of the East”* (Okakura, 1903). Okakura believed that while everything had various aspects, tea brought them together; which is the definition of Teatism (Okubo, 2014).

Japan has a unique history - the country was closed to the world for more than 200 years (1639 – 1854) and became isolated by this closure. However, thankfully, this provided the country with sufficient time to review its culture and develop the tea ceremony. The tea ceremony has influenced Japanese culture both mentally and physically. It has taught Japanese people about things such as pureness and harmony, a depth of esteem for one another, and the awe of social order. The styles of architecture, daily customs, clothes, cooking, pottery, lacquer craft, drawing and literature were all influenced by the tea ceremony.

Chapter 2 explains the history of tea, as well as the School of Tea. Tea was born in China as medicine. In the 4th century, it became a drink, and in the middle of the 8th century, tea became respected as a ceremony for executives. Unfortunately, the tea ceremony fell into desuetude in China between the 13th to 17th centuries because of the domination of different races, such as the Mongolians. A Zen monk introduced tea to Japan in the

8th century, which is how the story of the tea ceremony developed. In the 15th century *“the tea ceremony became fully constituted into an independent and secular performance. Since that time, Teatism has been fully established in Japan ”*. The ceremony was not only for executives but also for ordinary citizens. For Japanese people, the tea ceremony was a religion, teaching people how to live. That is why Okakura called it Teatism.

The tea ceremony provided the value of modesty to Japanese people. From a global perspective, the Japanese were thought of as humble and polite, which was influenced by the ideas within the tea ceremony. For example, within the tea ceremony, vivid colours could not be harmonized within the tea room, sounds that disturbed the rhythm of the ceremony, and behaviours that destroyed the atmosphere and words, and broke with unity, were all prohibited because they were no match with nature. Harmony, rhythm, atmosphere, and unity are important elements in Japanese lives.

Chapter 3 explains Taoism and Zennism, as tea is deeply related to Taoism. The author wrote *“we have already remarked that the tea-ceremony was a development of the Zen ritual. The name of Laotse, the founder of Taoism, is also intimately associated with the history of Tea.”* Taoism emphasizes the importance of empty, meaning that emptiness could accept everything. For example, the importance of a room is not the wall or ceiling, but the empty spaces. The same is true for the human body when it exercises. The body should be empty. *“This empty theory has greatly influenced all our theories of action, even to those of fencing and wrestling”*. For instance, this is reflected in the traditional Japanese sports of Kendo and Judo. Kendo is a kind of fencing using bamboo staves. Judo is a kind of

wrestling method of defending oneself or fighting without the use of weapons. The theory also influenced the visual arts. The area that an empty space accepted invited people who could see the art. People became attracted to this theory and felt a sense of affinity with the art.

Zennism following Taoism. In Zennism, *“the most respected and advanced monks were given the more irksome and menial tasks”*. This was emphasized as a kind of training. *“Such services formed a part of the Zen discipline and every last action must be done absolutely perfectly”* The idea of the tea ceremony derived from this thinking within Zennism and found greatness in the small details of the lives of Japanese people.

Chapter 4 explains the tea-room, where the tea ceremony is conducted. *“To European architects brought up on the traditions of stone and brick construction, our Japanese method of building with wood and bamboo seems to be scarcely worthy to be ranked as architecture”*, Japanese architecture style was influenced by the tea-room. By the empty theory, the tea-room eliminated any extra decoration and valued empty space. The imagination could fulfil the work of finishing by leaving some elements unfinished, symbolizing the spirit of respecting imperfection. This concept of the tea ceremony had had a profound influence on Japanese architecture from the 16th century. Ordinarily, the interior design of current and typical Japanese houses would have felt tasteless by Western people.

Another interesting aspect of the tea-room was that the entrance of the room was small, and the height was under one meter, so everybody had to bend down to enter the room. The style was for awareness of humility. Even in the daytime, the tea-room was dim, and guests carefully wore clothes in

dark colours. Cleanliness was required. These thoughts came from the idea of beauty in nature. The style of the tea-room was based on ancient Japanese architectural ideas. Eternity was the idea, not a substance but in the spirit. A simple building like the tea-room was a manifestation of that spirit. *“The simplicity of the tea-room and its freedom from vulgarity make it truly a sanctuary from the vexations of the outer world”*. This means that a tea-room is not only an architectural thing but a spiritual place that gives peace of mind.

Chapter 5 explains art appreciation. In this chapter, the author provides instructions on how to see and feel art. Art appreciation means that *“Our mind is the canvas on which the artists lay their colour; their pigments are our emotions; their chiaroscuro the light of joy, the shadow of sadness. The masterpiece is of ourselves, as we are of the masterpiece.”* Okakura was an art specialist and argued that the true meaning of art was that the artist and the viewer sympathized and communicated with each other through the artwork. He thought that it was important that the artist and viewer both humbly control the other. In art, *“It is rather the soul rather than the hand, the man rather than the technique, which appeals to us”*. Okakura had the same ideas about the tea ceremony in that it could not be realized by either the owner or the customer alone. It would be realized only when both parties came together with the attitude of collaborative work. In this chapter, he laments that the public demand only the most popular items, regardless of their judgment. He felt shame about a boom to choose something that suited fashion rather than a true beauty when the boom was the same at all times.

Chapter 6 explains flowers. Okakura expressed that *“surely with mankind the appreciation of flowers must have been coeval with the poetry of love”*. Flower arrangement in Japan was born in the 15th century in line with the concept of the tea ceremony. The first flower arrangements were made by Buddhist monks who gathered flowers after a storm in a container while thinking in terms of an endless sympathy for living things. In the tea ceremony, the flower arrangement is an essential part of the decoration. Therefore, flashy flowers are kept out of the tea room. When a tea-master arranges a flower, *“nothing else will be placed near it which might interfere with its effect, not even a painting, unless there be some special aesthetic reason for the combination”*. The attitude toward flowers demonstrated culture, and Japanese people expressed their unifying feelings about nature through flowers. The flowers would always fall at the end. Japanese people knew that this was nature, and saw an ephemeral beauty in cherry blossoms, which is the most popular flower in Japan.

Chapter 7 introduces the life stories of the tea-masters. Tea-masters are specialists who managed the tea ceremony. However, they were not only specialists but also contributors to art. *“The tea-masters held that real appreciation of art was only possible to those who made of it a living influence”*. This means that the tea-masters thought that they could truly enjoy art only by putting art into their daily lives. The tea-masters contributed to the style of architecture of the tea-room, castle, palace, and other wooden architectures from the 16th century onwards. Japanese gardens, as well all the famous gardens in Japan, were designed by tea-masters. Pottery design was also developed by the tea-masters, as well as

many famous textiles, which were named after the tea-masters who had invented the colours and patterns. No matter what kind of art the Japanese pursued, there was no evidence of their talent. Japanese people could feel the existence of a tea-master in their daily lives. For instance, how to cook and wear plain clothes. Through the tea-masters, Japanese were taught the beauty of being humble and respecting innate simplicity. Thus, Japanese lifestyles were created by tea-masters.

At the conclusion of this chapter, Okakura introduces the death of a famous tea-master. *"The Last Tea of Rikyu"* was a well-known story handed down as the ultimate in tragic greatness. Rikyu, a great tea-master of the 16th century, was highly trusted by the politicians of the time. The enemies of Rikyu, who were jealous of him, spread a lie of the alleged assassination of a politician by the hands of Rikyu. For this reason, Rikyu was innocently required to kill himself. In ancient Japan times in the 16th-century Samurai era, suicide was an honour, as a testimony to a respectable man. When the day came that he had to die, he conducted the last tea ceremony, with only a few close people. Afterwards, he killed himself and went to heaven. For Rikyu, death was the last part of life and a supreme art. Okakura advocated that only those who had lived beautifully could die beautifully.

The Book of Tea thus closes with the ultimate unity between humans and nature. Throughout the book, the audience finds that the idea of the tea ceremony influences all facets of Japanese life, even for those who are unfamiliar with tea. There is another classic essay about Japanese culture for a Western audience written in English, named *"Bushido: The Soul of Japan"* (Nitobe 1900). It was published in 1900 in California, by Nitobe Inazo. In this

book, Nitobe argues that the Samurai spirit that acts boldly even he sacrifices himself for the cause is the root of the morality of the Japanese culture, and provides the imagery of a Samurai country to the West. Conversely, Okakura argues in his book that there is a deeper culture than fight and death. Tea led to peace and life for Japanese people. In the era of war, the Japanese military tended to admire the old Samurai spirit as fight and death. However, in the era of peace, people prefer to think about culture. For the younger generation or foreigners, knowing the existence of the tea ceremony is the way to understanding Japanese culture quickly.

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