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Tea Ceremony as Dialogical Space: The
Jesuits and the Way of Tea in Early
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The purpose of this paper is to illumine the distinctive character of Japanese tea ceremony as a space of human encounter and dialogue. In order to meet this goal, this paper looks back on Japanese history and explores the drama of encounter and interaction between Japanese and Jesuit missionaries. It will focus on the unique role that the space of the tea ceremony played in the discovery of a new spirituality, which was formed through cross-cultural and interfaith interactions with the other. The particular historical period in question is between the late sixteenth and the early seventeenth century. By this time, the great Japanese tea master Sen-no Rikyu (1522-1591) had transformed the pre-existing custom of formal tea drinking into a secular, communal, and spiritual practice. The emergence of the way of tea in the mid-sixteenth century coincided with the blossoming of Catholic missions in Japan, which began in 1549 with the arrival of St. Francis Xavier in Kagoshima. The European Jesuits who encountered the way of tea were deeply impressed by its aesthetics, although it belonged to something radically different from what they considered as the classic canon of beauty. They were well aware of the fact that the origin of the tea ceremony was Zen Buddhism and that Rikyu's way of tea had implicitly maintained the spirituality of Zen, even though the practice appeared secular explicitly. The missionaries, however, not only participated in the tea ceremonies, but they also noted that practicing the tea ceremony positively influenced the spiritual growth of some distinguished Japanese Christians, who were also tea masters.

As a pretext for this study, it is important to understand the relationship between Japanese religions and Christianity at their early encounter and interaction in the late sixteenth century. In sum, the relationship was highly antagonistic, although the content of intellectual exchange was rather profound. On the one hand, the relatively peaceful and

dialogical facet of their interaction included a number of formal disputations and informal conversations on religious beliefs and practices, which took place between the Jesuits and Buddhists elsewhere in Japan.¹ The content of these interreligious discussions, as known today from Jesuit primary sources, was undoubtedly polemical, and it is clear that both sides had little reserve of deference to each other – yet, what may be surprising is that the heated exchange had rarely (arguably never) developed into actual violence, and it even seems that at the end of the discussion both parties had understood something about the religion of the other first-hand. The violent aspect of the interaction, on the other hand, is obvious in a series of acts of vandalism and attacks committed against the religious symbols of the other – temples, churches, and statues. While both sides engaged in the attack against the icons of the other, what was more evident and more organized was the Christian (the missionaries and the Japanese converts) violence against Buddhist edifices and images, and the Christian missionaries were responsible for driving their converts to destructive action through their preaching against idolatry. Then, after a century of complex and dramatic interaction imbued with attraction, love and hate toward the other, there came the ban of Christianity in 1612 issued by Japanese political authority and the expulsion of all foreign missionaries in 1614, which one-sidedly terminated the relationship. Moreover, the Japanese Shogunate went on to implement the cruel persecution of remaining Japanese Christians over the years that followed.²

Upon understanding the historical background, it appears curious why the Jesuit missionaries fondly participated in the tea ceremony, which was clearly Buddhist in its

¹ Renzo de Luca, “The Document of the Yamaguchi Religious Detabes,” *Kirishitan-bunka Kenkyu-kai Kaiho* 119(2002):1-32.

² The first anti-Christian edict by the Japanese authority was issued in 1587 by Toyotomi Hideyoshi. The Tokugawa Shogunate, which succeeded Hideyoshi’s rule, issued another anti-Christian edict in 1612, expelled all foreign missionaries from the country in 1614, and in 1639 banned all contact with Europeans except Dutch merchants.

origin. They even encouraged the Japanese converts to continue practicing it. How did it happen? How was it possible? In fact, articulating the particular setup of the cross-cultural and interreligious interaction, which took place in the space of tea ceremony four hundred years ago, will shed light on certain aspects of interreligious dialogue, which have been relatively neglected by those who engage in the dialogue today. The points that should be considered are; firstly, the physical isolation of the space of tea ceremony from the outside world created a valuable third space in-between for sharing of a common experience among people with different cultural and religious dispositions. Secondly, it is important to acknowledge the viability and the advantage of non-discursive dialogue as a mode of communication; in other words, it is indeed possible to have a fruitful dialogical intercourse with others without having an “actual” conversation. Thirdly, the experience of genuine dialogue not only transforms the dispositions of two distinct groups involved, but it also nourishes the formation of the third group, which reconciles and creatively converges the two ways.

In order to highlight these points, I will first illustrate the characteristics of the tea ceremony, particularly in view of its advantage as a space of cross-cultural, interfaith encounter. Then, I will briefly review the history and the spirituality of the tea ceremony with a focus on the aspects that particularly allow genuine dialogue to occur. Finally, with reference to primary sources, I will investigate how the Jesuit missionaries observed and appreciated sharing a cup of tea with the Japanese and explore the formative impact of the tea ceremony on the spirituality of early Japanese Christians.

1. Tea Room (*chashitsu*) as a Space of Non-Violent and Equal Encounter

In the sixteenth-century Japan, there were three kinds of special occasions where people drank tea according to prescribed formalities. One of the occasions was when a guest was calling on the residence of a noble family. He (in those days women were not allowed

to make formal visitations) was met by a servant at the main entrance, ushered to the special reception room and received a cup of tea (*cha* or *ocha* in Japanese) while he was waiting for the master of the house to appear. This was also the way of receiving guests at Buddhist temples, and some of the Zen temples had specially decorated reception rooms for visitors, where they were served tea by a certain rank of monks called *doboshu*.³ The second kind was when a group of guests, usually no more than three, drank tea prepared by the host together in a tea room or a small tea house built in the garden. The third kind of formal tea gathering was the large tea party, where people of all ranks and classes gathered to drink tea in an open space. At the famous “Great Tea Ceremony of Kitano” in 1587, hosted by Toyotomi Hideyoshi (d. 1598), who was the ruler of Japan at the time, it is said that there were eight hundred guests from all levels of society and this grand outdoor tea party went on for ten days.⁴ People were also allowed to come uninvited and to join the crowd, as long as they brought their own kettles and cups. In principle, women were excluded from the first two kinds of tea ceremonies, but a number of women came to and enjoyed drinking tea at the Kitano party.⁵

For the purpose of this paper, the most important type of the tea ceremony is the second one among the three. Primarily, the first type had to do with social decorum, and the

³ Sen’o Tanaka, *The Tea Ceremony* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1973), 30.

⁴ Horst Hammitzsch, *Zen in the Art of the Tea Ceremony* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1980), 37.

⁵ In modern scholarship, there are different theories for the development of Japanese tea ceremony, which occurred gradually between the fourteenth and the sixteenth century. One of the important theories, which I do not mention in my text, is to see the development as a process of the emergence of distinct Japanese aesthetics of *wabi*, which came into existence out of the Chinese philosophy and aesthetics of tea ritual. See “Introduction” Denis Hirota, *Wind in the Pines: Classic Writings of the Way of Tea as a Buddhist Path* (Fremont, CA: Asian Humanities Press, 1995). Also, for sociological views on the tea ceremony in early modern Japan, see Eiko Ikegami, *Bonds of Civility: Aesthetic Networks and the Political Origins of Japanese Culture* (New York: Cambridge University press, 2005), 120-6; Dale Slusser, “The Transformation of Tea Practice,” in *Japanese Tea Culture: Art, History, and Practice*, ed. Morgan Pitelka (New York: Routledge, 2003).

third type had to do with politics; the grand outdoor tea event was a way for some rich and powerful men to demonstrate their power. As to what actually happens in the second type of the tea ceremony, the modern scholar Denis Hirota provides a succinct summary – in fact, there is nothing special or extraordinary,

The practices of *chanoyu* ... focuses on a small gathering in which the host lays fresh charcoal to boil water, serves a meal, then prepares powdered tea whisked with hot water. The tea is made in two forms: first thick, in which a large amount of tea is carefully kneaded with hot water, and which the guests partake in turn from a single teabowl; then thin, in which a smaller proportion of tea to water is deftly whisked for each individual guest.⁶

While the action that takes place inside the tea house comes down to simply serving and drinking tea, any participant of the tea ceremony would not miss the profoundly meditative atmosphere of the space. While no word serves to fully articulate the marked intensity, which permeates the course of tea ceremony, I suggest understanding its principles in terms of transformation and indifference.

Transformation has to do with one's quietly sitting in an isolated tea room with others and participate in an experience that is believed to be "the one chance in one's lifetime" (*ichigo-ichie*), and thereby become awakened to a new self-consciousness, which is relational and is in harmony with one's environment. Indifference has to do with being free of selfish concerns about social esteem, money or worldly pleasure. In order to practice indifference toward worldly concerns, as a rule, a tea house should look rustic from outside and the cups and utensils used at the ceremony must be simple, natural and practical.⁷

⁶ Denis Hirota, *Wind in the Pines*, 12.

⁷ Today, the tea ceremony has become a very expensive pastime, which requires the costly maintenance of traditional garden and the cottage. The price of teacups and utensils created by a well-known artist can be astronomical, while the teacups with historical value are rather exhibited in museums.

With regards to the transformation that is to be conceived by the participants of the tea ceremony, contemporary Japanologist Horst Hammitzsch describes his first experience of the tea ceremony as follows, beginning with the short walk into the cottage with the other guests,

And with every step into the depth of the garden, the everyday world, with its bustling haste, fades from the mind. One steps into a world that is free of everyday pressures, forgets the whys and ceases to enquire into the wherefores. The deeper the guest penetrates into the garden, this world of solemn tranquility, the freer he becomes of everyday cares. The other guests, too, seem to have become changed people. [...] All of them have forgotten the everyday things that normally rule their lives from early morning until late at night. Casting them off, they have committed themselves unreservedly to this world of silence, of inner freedom.⁸

As a practical gesture to cast off their worldly self-consciousness, the guests are asked to enter into the tea house through a mere three feet x three feet opening, which is situated about a foot above the ground, so one has to crawl inside on one's knees (there is also a much bigger back entrance attached to the tea house, through which the host goes in and out). This seemingly inconvenient entrance, however, had an important function in the sixteenth century. In order to pass through this "narrow gate," a *samurai* warrior had to give up his sword, which he otherwise carried on the waist everywhere he went, and a nobleman might have to give up his hat, if he was wearing the traditional top hat allowed for high-ranking courtiers. Thus, inside a tea house was a space of non-violence, where no arms were ever allowed, and it was also a space where one encountered and shared a cup of tea with the others as equals in total humility.

2. Spirituality of the Tea Ceremony

There are several classic axioms in Japan that represent the spirituality of the way of tea in a few words. One of them is the aforementioned "The one chance in one's lifetime," and the others are "Tea and Zen are one and the same flavor" (*chazen-ichimi*) and "Founding

⁸ Horst Hammitzsch, *Zen in the Art of the Tea Ceremony*, 13.

an assembly/community” (*ichiza-konryu*).⁹ The second one, “Tea and Zen are one” directly refers to the origin of the tea ceremony; the drinking of powdered tea and associated formalities derived originally from the practice of the Zen monks in Sung dynasty (960-1279) China. The third axiom, “founding an assembly/community” concerns the goal of the tea ceremony. These old sayings indicate not only the commonality, but also the difference between Zen Buddhism and the way of tea. While Zen’s goal is each individual practitioner’s experiencing the enlightenment, the tea ceremony, whose spirit is one with Zen, seeks communal experience of liberation from worldly concerns and being in harmony with nature.

The custom of tea drinking had been already widespread in China during the Six Dynasties (420-588), and tea came to be especially valued as medicine during the Tang dynasty (618-906). The first classic book of “Teaism” was written by the master Lu Wu sometime in the late eighth century, where he explained how to plant, grow and harvest tea plant, and how to prepare it. In this early form of tea preparation, tea leaves were “steamed, pounded in a tea-mortar and molded into a cake, pieces of which could then be cut off as needed.”¹⁰ The pulverized tea, which is used in the tea ceremony, came to be popular in the Sung period, and the Zen monks favored it because it helped them stay alert and calm during meditation. There is a story of some Chinese monks during this period who used to gather around the image of the patriarch Bodhidharma and drank tea out of a single bowl in commemoration of their great master. Also in the Zen temples in Japan, to which the pulverized tea was first brought from China by the Zen master Eisai (1141-1215), the monks

⁹ These idioms are to be understood with profound connotations and are impossible to translate. The first phrase is translated into English by Sen’o Tanaka (see Tanaka, *The Tea Ceremony*, 22) and the other two are my own translation. My translations are tentative.

¹⁰ Hammitzsch, 26.

served tea to the guests in a special reception room where the pictures of Buddha and Avalokiteshvara were hanging on the wall.¹¹

One of the early tea masters, who played an important role for simplifying the tea-drinking rituals in Japan was Murata Juko (or Shuko: 1423-1502). At the time of Juko, entertaining guests in a lavishly decorated tea room belonged to the opulent lifestyle of aristocrats and courtiers; and for the Buddhist monks, their way of tea was exclusive to the religious. Juko's writings on the tea ceremony shows that he was trying to develop a new form of tea sharing, which did away with the ostentatious, high-class luxury taste from the courtier's tea, while at the same time he took away religious exclusiveness from the monastic way of tea. Paradoxically, however, his democratization and the simplification of the tea ceremony deepened its spiritual content – the simplicity inside the tea house provided a space where the participants looked into the depth of the hearts and experienced communion with others in ontological bareness. Thus, according to Juko, “The arrangement of the tea room should be such as to soothe the hearts of hosts and guests, and should in no way distract their thoughts. This is of prime importance. It must penetrate to the very depths of the heart, while having nothing about it of the outer.”¹²

In comparison with the earlier forms of tea drinking, the final development of the Japanese tea ceremony as perfected by Rikyu who followed Juko, was “aniconic” and “spiritual” at the same time. “Aniconic” is the utter simplicity of the space. The decoration of the room is limited to a few branches of fresh flowers and just one piece of hanging scroll, usually a piece of calligraphy or a landscape painting. Explicit religious icons such as the image of the Buddha are avoided. It is also a “spiritual” practice, but not really “religious,”

¹¹ Kakuzo Okakura, *The Book of Tea* (First edition published in 1906; Reprint, New York: Dover Publications, 1964), 16.

¹² Juko's instruction quoted in Hammitzsch, 47.

in the sense that it does not explicitly refer to any particular religious doctrines or practices, even though the space of tea is filled with allusions to Zen Buddhism. In other words, the space of the tea ceremony represents a unique fusion of the secular and religious.

Although Rikyu was well versed in Buddhist doctrines, in terms of social rank, he was a middle-class layperson from the city of Sakai in central Japan. In the sixteenth century, Sakai was a major international port and a commercial town where the merchant middle-class was emerging as a new power and bringing their secular value into the upper-class society, which consisted of aristocrats and Buddhist clergy. Rikyu's tea ceremony was an egalitarian space, where it did not matter whether one was clergy or laity, Buddhist or Christian.¹³ In this context, the early twentieth-century scholar of Japanese aesthetics, Kakuzo Okakura wrote in his famous *The Book of Tea* that the tea ceremony spread into the early modern Japanese society, not as a religious sacrament, but as a secular and social sacrament.¹⁴

Juko and Rikyu had stripped off the religious icons that had been present in the tea rooms of the Buddhist monasteries, yet the space still spoke soundly for the Buddhist ideal –

¹³ The tea ceremony, however, had little to do with the broader egalitarianism in the modern sense. In other words, the equality among the participants was limited within the space of the tea ceremony. And as Dale Slusser says, from the beginning of the way of tea, there always has been a kind of elitism among the fellow practitioners of the tea ceremony against those who do not. Slusser, "The Transformation of Tea Practice," 48.

¹⁴ Kakuzo Okakura, *The Book of Tea*, xvi.

Recently, some scholars have pointed out a similarity between Eucharist and the tea ceremony, and they seem to claim as if there was a direct connection between the tea ceremony and Catholic Eucharist, in terms of the formality of the ritual and also of their communal function. I would contest to such a comparison, however, on the ground that the Japanese tea ceremony has nothing to do with sacramental "presence." Cf. Bernard Hassan, "What Makes Catholicism Unique and Vital," *The American Catholic Catalog* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980): vii-xiv; Soichi Masubuchi, *Sado to Jujika* (Tokyo: Kadokawa Sensho,); Nakamaro Abe, *Shinko no Bigaku* (Tokyo: Shunpu-sha, 2004), 80-2.

the state of self-forgetfulness and being in complete harmony with nature.¹⁵ The innovation of the tea ceremony in the sixteenth century challenged the practitioners to experience the space in communion with others present with an open and undisturbed heart – which eventually came to be the very goal of the tea ceremony. According to Horst Hammitzsch, in the tea ceremony, “A temple of common experience, *ichiza-kenritsu*, is erected, where those of like beliefs, pupils of a single Way in quest of an inner harmony that is far removed from the world, find each other on that Way.”¹⁶ To be sure, “those of like beliefs” do not designate those who share a common faith, but refers to the beliefs in the virtue of something beyond worldly criteria or institutions, such as nature, beauty, and harmony.

Furthermore, in regard to the “founding an assembly/community” (*ichiza-konryu*) concept, it is important to note that the communication, which occurs in the space of the tea ceremony is dialogical, but it does not consist of discursive dialogue. The conversation that takes place inside the tea room is highly formalized and extremely succinct. Beside fixed sets of exchange between the host and the guests, the typical tea ceremony conversation consists of a few simple words uttered on the beauty of the season, garden and the cottage. Topics about money, politics, religion, or any other personal concerns are taboo in the realm of tea. There exists, however, a sense of profound communication and communion among the participants of the tea ceremony, and in order to understand the nature of this communication, it might be meaningful to refer to the concept of dialogue explicated in Martin Buber’s essay “Dialogue (*Zwiesprache*).”¹⁷ According to Buber, a genuine dialogue

¹⁵ Religious icons are not completely forbidden in the tea-rooms, however. The calligraphy by famous monks or allegorical Zen paintings are often used to decorate the tea-room.

¹⁶ “*Ichiza-konryu*,” instead of “*ichiza-kenritsu*,” is more common reading. Hammitzsch, 48.

¹⁷ By definition, therefore, Buber considers dialogue as a communication between two (*Zwiesprache*), between a subject and a subject. Certainly, the communication in the space of tea ceremony may go beyond binary communication.

can either be spoken or silent, but “each of the participants really has in mind the other or others in their present and particular being and turns to them with the intention of establishing a living mutual relation between himself and then.”¹⁸ This is exactly what happens in the silent space of the tea ceremony - namely, one’s turning toward others in one’s naked being, which pulsates in the moment of “the one chance in one’s lifetime.” The cups of tea prepared in this dialogical space are shared to commemorate the transformation of the relation, from “*I and He/She*” to “*I and Thou*”, and finally to “*We*.” Here, “*We*” is not to be considered as a collective subject, but rather the totality of the space, which is beyond the subject-object recognition and includes not only the other human beings in the space, but also the whole surroundings: the movement of nature outside, the empty space in the tea house, as well as the historical experience commemorated in the arts, cups and utensils. The wholeness, however, does not demand each person’s individuality be lost into the whole. Rather, a keen practitioner of the tea ceremony would realize that one’s true individuality can exist – or can only exist – relationally being in communion with others and nature.¹⁹

The tea ceremony is a dialogical space, where one may experience a genuine dialogue with the other/others. The simplicity of the tea house, its natural standing and decoration, avoidance of iconic representations, and various other manners help establish a radically neutral space for contemplation. With regard to the cross-cultural and interfaith dialogue, however, the tea ceremony cannot be a place to have a confessional dialogue, since the conversation held in the tea room should include no opinions, arguments or

¹⁸ Martin Buber, “Dialogue,” in *Between Man and Man* (New York: Reutledge Classics, 2002), 22.

¹⁹ Kakuzo Okakura explains the dynamics in terms of a play. He says, “To keep the proportion of things and give place to others without losing one’s own position was the secret of success in the mundane drama. We must know the whole play in order to properly act our parts; the conception of totality must never be lost in that of the individual.” Okakura, 24.

clarifications. Moreover, the participants are challenged to cast off all their concerns, even their religious belongings. If the space could be confessional in some sense, it had to be in the communal and spiritual sense; this is to say that one may confess one's belief in a loving companionship with others and nature, during the ritual of silent, wordless sharing of tea.

3. Sixteenth-Century Jesuit Accounts on the Tea Ceremony

The early Jesuit mission to Japan was one of the earliest missions that employed cultural adaptation as mission strategy. The strategy of cultural adaptation was mainly the contribution of the Italian Jesuit Alessandro Valignano (1549-1606), who conceived that it was absolutely necessary for the missionaries to conform to Japanese customs and their way of living in order to better proceed toward their goal: the evangelization of the whole population. Their work came to an end with the ban of Christianity by the Japanese government in 1612, and at that point, although they were far from converting the entire population, they had made an outstanding progress in the cultural adaptation. The percentage of Christians among the population of Japan was much higher in the early seventeenth century than the number we see today. Among the Japanese converts of the period, there were many tea masters and practitioners, and in fact, five of the seven direct disciples of Rikyū are believed to have been Christians.²⁰

As a part of the cultural accommodation strategy, Alessandro Valignano instructed the Jesuits in Japan to build all their residences in Japanese style with a reception room so that the guests can be properly welcomed and received in accordance with the custom of the first type formal tea drinking. In place of the *doboshu* in the Zen temples, at the Jesuit residences, Japanese lay brothers called *dojuku* welcomed the guests and served tea. In 1581, Valignano gave an instruction about tea-formalities in the treatise *Advertimentos e*

²⁰ Herbert Cieslik "Sado to Kirishitan no Deai," *Kirishitan Bunka Kenkyu-kai Kaiho* 17/1(1975), 607; Tei Nishimura, *Kirishitan to Sado* (Kyoto: Zenkoku-shobo, 1948).

avisos acerca dos costumes e catangues de Jappão as follows,²¹ (The following passage has been paraphrased by Josef Franz Schütte)

In all the houses there should be a special room near the entrance door for the preparation of the *chanoyu*, the ceremonial tea, for in accordance with general custom entertainment with the *ocha* (tea) could not be omitted even in mission stations. There the tea attendant, the *chanoyusha* (a *dojuku*, or one of the house staff), was to be continuously on duty; he had to have a good knowledge of his office, especially in places where many distinguished people called.²²

It appears that the Jesuits in Japan lacked the financial resource to build all their residences in the style of wealthy Buddhist temples and households, but at least a few residences in big cities were built accordingly to Valignano's instruction. Their hybrid architecture is evidenced in some of the contemporary Japanese paintings, which depict the view of an international port (either Sakai or Nagasaki) and a tea room attached to a Christian church.²³

Needless to say, for the missionaries in the sixteenth-century Japan, religious orthodoxy according to the decrees of the Council of Trent was the absolute priority and so the Jesuit adaptation strategy was strictly limited to the cultural sphere. The Jesuits' relationship with the Japanese "pagan" religions was generally polemic and confrontational, but the tea ceremony offered a unique space where the European missionaries encountered the Buddhist spirituality without being bothered by the iconoclastic imperative against pagan symbols. The Portuguese Jesuit, Luis d'Almeida was one of the early missionaries, who recorded in 1565 about the aesthetic attraction of the tea ceremony. In the report, Almeida

²¹ Valignano was an Italian, but he dictated this treatise in Portuguese. "*Catangues*" is the Japanese word "*katagi*" (it was pronounced *katangi* in the sixteenth century) which means manners and formalities.

²² Josef Franz Schütte, *Valignano's Mission Principles for Japan*, vol. 2 (St. Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1985), 170. As to the original text, see *Il Cerimoniale per I Missionari del Giappone* (Rome: Storia e Letteratura, 1946), 160-3. This critical edition is a bilingual, Portuguese and Italian version with footnotes by Schütte.

²³ Also, the construction of churches Jesuit residences were in most part funded and conducted by the local converts, and in many cases they renovated pre-existing Japanese edifice into churches.

wrote about the custom of “giving parties to drink this herb” as follows, “These parties are given in special houses, only used on such occasions, which are marvels of cleanliness.” While it seems that the content of the meal served prior to tea drinking did not quite match the taste of the Jesuit, he was nonetheless much impressed by the orderly service and the simple beauty of the utensils used at the tea ceremony. He continued to praise the Japanese tea custom, “I can confidently affirm that nowhere in the whole wide world would it be possible to find a meal better served and appointed than in Japan.”²⁴

Although the Jesuit amazement at the orderliness and solemnity of the Japanese tea ceremony was real, it appears that neither Valignano nor Almeida really liked the stark taste of pulverized green tea. Among the European Jesuits, the Portuguese Joao Rodrigues (d. 1633) – the Japanese called him “The Interpreter”- was the one, who was most engaged in the tea culture of Japan. Rodrigues first came to Japan in the late 1570s at the age of fifteen or sixteen, as a servant boy to Portuguese merchants. After being admitted to the Society of Jesus in Japan, he completed his theological education and was ordained a priest without ever going back to Europe. He lived and worked in Japan until 1614, and in those days his skill in Japanese language, as well as his knowledge of the culture, was probably the best among the Jesuits. According to his modern biographer Michael Cooper, Rodrigues the Interpreter was “a tea enthusiast,” who may have a little exaggerated the merit of tea when he wrote, “the drink improves the digestion, stimulates the mind, reduces temperature in time of illness, and helps to keep the country free of plague.” Furthermore, he believed that

²⁴ Charles Ralf Boxer, *The Christian Century in Japan 1549-1650* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 54.

tea was “very good for chastity and continence, because it possesses the quality of restraining and cooling the kidneys.”²⁵

In his *History of the Church in Japan*, written towards the end of his life in Macao, Rodrigues spent four chapters describing the tea ceremony, its spirituality and aesthetics.²⁶ In the first of the four chapters, he describes the general quality of the drink, how to plant and harvest tea trees. In the second chapter, he sets out the general principle and the spirituality of the tea ceremony as follows,

For in this manner of entertainment and etiquette, no attention is paid to rank either by the host or by the guest, for both nobles and people of lesser standing who practice this art are regarded as equals whilst engaged in it. [...] So this gathering for *cha* and conversation is not intended for lengthy talk among themselves, but rather to contemplate within their souls with all peace and modesty the things they see there and thus through their own efforts to understand the mysteries locked therein.²⁷

Rodrigues points out the characteristics of the tea ceremony and how it was different from the social pastime of the Japanese courtiers. He especially distinguishes what he believed as the true tea ceremony, “*suki*,” from general tea-drinking, *chanoyu*. *Suki* (pronounced as *su-u-ki*) is a word that is rarely used in modern Japanese, but it is one of the traditional concepts of tea aesthetics and refers to the virtue of rejecting superficial beauty and loving the quality hidden inside.²⁸ In one of the tea ceremony classics *Zen-cha-roku*, it says that *suki* is “not to follow the world, not to accompany profanity, to avoid finery and enjoy ugliness” (my

²⁵ Michael Cooper, *Rodrigues the Interpreter* (New York: Weatherhill, 1974; paperback edition, 1994), 309.

²⁶ From chapter 32 to chapter 35 of Book 1 of *Historia da Igreja do Japao*. For English translation, see *Joao Rodrigues's Account of Sixteenth-Century Japan*, Ed. Michael Cooper (London: The Hakluyt Society, 2001).

²⁷ *Joao Rodrigues's Account of Sixteenth-Century Japan*, 282.

²⁸ Other important keywords for the aesthetics of tea ceremony are *wabi* and *sabi*, which Rodrigues does not mention at all in his writings.

translation).²⁹ The word's etymology is obscure, but it probably derived from the verb *suku*, to have affection. Rodrigues rightly understands the historical development of the way of tea and says that *suki* developed out of imitating the way of the Zen philosophers, "... as regards its eremitical seclusion and withdrawal from all dealings in social matters, its resolution and mental alertness in everything ..."³⁰ He then speaks of certain Sakai men who built the tea cottage which "represented, as far as the limited site allowed, the style of lonely houses found in the countryside, or like the cells of solitaries who dwell in hermitages far removed from people and give themselves over to the contemplation of the things of nature and its First Cause."³¹ It is very likely that as "certain Sakai men" Rodrigues was speaking of Rikyu.

Rodrigues's third chapter on Japanese tea culture focuses on the *suki* tea ceremony. He recounts his own experience of participating in the ceremony as follows,

Then as they walk along the path through the wood up to the *cha* house, they quietly contemplate everything there – the wood itself, individual trees in their natural state and setting, the paving stones, and the rough stone trough for washing the hands. [...] They now approach to the closed door of the small house. This is set somewhat above the ground and is just large enough for a person to pass through provided he stoops. They remove their fans and daggers from their sashes, and deposit them in a kind of cupboard placed there outside for this purpose.³²

After this remark, which demonstrates a remarkable continuity with the modern experience discussed earlier, Rodrigues continues at full length into each detail of a full-course tea ceremony, including the formal greeting by the host, the ritual of lighting the stove, serving of meal and sweets, and finally the preparation and sharing of tea.

²⁹ See notes 16-19 in *Rodrigues Nihon Kyokai-shi*, trans. Tsutomu Ema, et al. (Tokyo: Iwanami-shoten, 1967), 603.

³⁰ *Joao Rodrigues's Account of Sixteenth-Century Japan*, 289.

³¹ *Ibid*, 291.

³² *Ibid*, 301.

Finally, in the fourth chapter, Rodrigues goes on explicating the spirituality and aesthetics of *suki*. He states that discerning the true beauty of the space of tea calls for certain disposition to appreciate hidden harmony between things and the nature, without being distracted by their mere appearance. Indeed, the aesthetics of *suki* has to do with no aesthetic judgment on material appearance, but it has to do with careful discernment that takes into account the true quality of things and the dynamic relation among things and the environment. With regard to the discernment of harmony, Rodrigues says that the masters of *suki* must pay attention to “the time of the *cha* meeting, whether it be spring, summer, autumn, or winter, whether in the morning, afternoon, or at night.”³³ The arrangement and the decoration of the interior of the house and the style of utensils must be in accord with the season. In making a guest list, the host must carefully discern whether the group dynamics would be suitable for the particular occasion.

According to Rodrigues, there was a difference between genuine *suki* masters and amateur tea practitioners; the latter tended to be distracted by the glossy appearance of rich utensils and other superficialities. In his opinion, the Christian lord of Takatsuki (the region in central Japan between Sakai and Kyoto), Justo Takayama Ukon (d. 1615) was one of the true masters who mastered the *suki* aesthetics and he was also a faithful Christian at the same time. Rodrigues says of Justo Takayama,

He was wont to remark, as we several times heard him, that he found *suki* a great help towards virtue and recollection for those who practiced it and really understood its purpose. Thus he used to say that in order to commend himself to God he would retire to that small house with a statue, and there according to the custom that he had formed he found peace and recollection.³⁴

Justo Takayama was one of the seven direct disciples of Rikyu, and Rodrigues rightly notes that Takayama was highly esteemed by both Japanese Christians and non-Christians as the

³³ Ibid, 306.

³⁴ Ibid, 308.

master of this art. His account also tells us that the tea house was the place Takayama retired to when he needed to meditate and “commend himself to God.” The principle of indifference at the tea ceremony, as well as the sense of discernment for proper harmony probably helped Takayama to meditate and find peace and recollection in God.

Discernment for the tea masters, however, was not necessarily the discernment between good and evil or questioning “to do or not to do,” but rather, it had to do with discerning the proper quality and harmony that are hidden in things and relations. The following is the famous story about Takayama, which shows the harmonious relationship between the way of Christ and the way of tea in his life. In 1587, when Toyotomi Hideyoshi issued the first anti-Christian edict, this ruler of Japan was appreciative of Takayama’s loyalty to himself, and sent none other than Rikyu to Takayama, so that he would leave the Church and be spared from persecution. Takayama declined and Rikyu left him alone fearing that insisting on apostasy would cause Takayama an irreconcilable dilemma between the two Ways he believed in. The anti-Christian edict was not thoroughly implemented at that time, and ironically, while Takayama lived a quiet life in exile in northern Japan, Rikyu instead was forced into committing suicide for an unknown reason, of which the historians still debate today. Takayama was finally ordered to leave the country in 1614 because of the new regime’s more severe anti-Christian policy. This time he knew that he would never return to Japan (he died as soon as he arrived in Manila next year). It is said that as he left the country, he took two personal items with him: one was a crucifix and the other was a piece of clothing, which he had received from his teacher Rikyu.³⁵

³⁵ Satoru Obara, “The Christian Mind in 16th and 17th-Century Japan,” in *St. Francis Xavier: An Apostle of the East*, vol. 2 (Tokyo: Sophia University Press, 2000), 99-100. Tei Nishimura, *Kirishitan to Sado*, 101.

Interestingly, there are a number of early seventeenth-century teabowls and water jars for the tea ceremony decorated with cross-motif, which may have belonged to these early Christian tea masters. As one looks at these teabowls with a cross marked on them, it appears that Japan and Christianity are reconciled together in harmony. Do they represent the early Japanese Christians' way to confess their faith in the space of tea ceremony? Rodrigues also says that Takayama brought a small statue (most likely a statue of the Virgin holding infant Jesus) with him to the tea house when he meditated alone. In any event, it was the radical openness and the dynamic inclusiveness inherent in the space of tea ceremony which invited Rodrigues and other Jesuits to contemplate on the First Cause within the framework of Japanese religion and at the same time allowed Takayama and other Japanese Christians to be Japanese and Christian, advance in contemplation, and find peace and harmony in their "double-belonging."³⁶

³⁶ Multiple religious belonging is an on-going theme today, which has been contemplated and discussed in the fields of Christian theology and religious studies. See Catherine Cornille, ed. *Many Mnsions?: Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity* (New York: Orbis Books, 2002).