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Kaiseki, Matcha, Wagashi
Taste in the Japanese Tea Ceremony

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Abstract
The aim of this contribution is to explore the performativity of taste in the Japanese tea ceremony. While widely recognized as a non-Western artistic expression, its aesthetic exploration has largely neglected the significant contribution of food and tea prepared and shared – *kaiseki* (meal), *wagashi* (sweets), *usucha* and *koicha* (thin and thick tea) – while emphasizing what is commonly related to the artworld. I delve into the varied meanings of taste by adopting a non-exceptionalist and everyday aesthetic perspective. In this framework, I investigate some intertwined aspects, such as the intentional conveyance of imperfection and impermanence throughout the ritual, the contradictory harmony and effects of food and tea, and the contribution of taste in crafting a performance as an artistic expression. To do this, a shift from an object-oriented perspective to a relational and operative one is needed. Here, sensory qualities and sharing are neither vehicles nor signs for meaning, but are themselves meaningful as evenemential relationships. Taste acts as a modality, shaping the unique relationship unfolding between host, guest and the environment. By carrying both aesthetic and ethical values, taste not only emphasizes the philosophical meaning of hospitality, but also contributes to understanding the ceremony as an action that is simultaneously routine and extraordinary, capable of redefining the very notion of artistic performance.

Keywords
Japanese Aesthetics, Taste, Tea Ceremony, Kaiseki, Wagashi, Matcha

1. *Introduction*

Know *that* chanoyu
Is simply this:
Boil water,
Prepare tea,
And drink – that is all.

(Attributed to Rikyū,
quoted from Varley &
Kumakura 1989, p. 168)

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Japanese tea ceremony is interchangeably known as *chanoyu* (茶の湯), *sadō* or *chadō* (茶道). *Chanoyu*, the most common term, literally means 'hot water for tea', while *sadō* (or *chadō*), 'the way of tea', refers to the philosophy and practice associated with this ritual. Coined around 1650, these terms are rooted in the concept of a 'way' (*dō,* from the Chinese *dao*), a path to reach a religious, aesthetic and philosophical enhanced awareness. Although many Japanese have never attended a tea ceremony, it remains a widely recognized symbol of their culture due to its integration of various arts, social customs and unwritten rules into a unified performative experience. Originating as a moment of interaction between military elites and aristocratic circles, the tea practice has evolved into a pastime for merchants, and more recently, a refined pursuit for well-off women, particularly those not engaged in any formal employment. Nonetheless, it has upheld stringent codes of conduct, revered influential figures and maintained its significance as a diplomatic instrument (Surak 2013, p. 9).

Chanoyu is today recognized as a non-Western art form, characterized by imperfection, contingency and irregularity, all traits that redefine what can be understood as a work of art. However, I posit here that tea and food have been overlooked in establishing its aesthetic value. The focus has been on the more traditionally 'artistic' elements, like the spatial architecture or the formalized sequence of actions. *Chanoyu* is indeed a multifaceted event requiring a variety of objects and gestures, based on precise codes. Beyond its structured principles, however, it exerts a transformative influence on all participants, and in this regard, taste is key, elevating ordinary acts into aesthetic ones.

My aim is to explore the performativity of taste in *chanoyu*. Taste is not only a physical and metaphorical sense but also an experiential modality that transcends mere ingestion. The notion of taste encompasses the atmosphere it evokes: experiencing the world through it blurs the lines between subject and object, as well as between what it is considered sensible and the intellectual. In the tea ceremony, taste is stimulated by food and tea while activating the ever-evolving relationships among host, guests and the environment. It embodies the aesthetic and ethical dimensions of hospitality, revealing the ceremony as a blend of ordinary and extraordinary, hence reshaping the very conception of artistic performance and social ritual.

The literature on *chanoyu* is extensive and cross-disciplinary. Avoiding philological and historical references, I phenomenologically interpret my firsthand experiences and a few philosophical

accounts (mostly translated in English) on it. My considerations are also based on some personal interactions with Sotatsu Ota Toru, a tea master and *wagashi* maker from Kyoto. In the second section, I introduce the aesthetics of *chanoyu*, emphasizing its key features. In the third and fourth sections, I focus on the meal, sweets, and tea, as they disclose the profound relational aesthetic mode of this practice. Lastly, after showing how taste can help interpret the ceremony as both performance art and ritual, I draw conclusions on its value.

2. *The Aesthetics of* Chanoyu

Even though each ceremony is a unique event – as implied by the term *ichi go ichi e* (一期一会), 'one moment (or one life), one meeting' –, four distinct types of *chanoyu* can be identified. *O-keiko* is a simple ceremony lesson, now particularly aimed at women. The lessons I attended were taught by an elderly female teacher and were exclusively taken by young women of 'marriageable' age. Since personal empowerment is a foundational principle of this practice (Okakura 1964), it serves as part of their preparation for marriage. Among other things, it teaches them how to control their bodies and various situations, and helps build self-confidence (Mori 1991). *Soegama* is a commercial tea meeting organized by craftsmen for potential buyers to show and sell utensils. *Ooyose chakai*, or the 'public tea gathering', is held for a large group of guests with less rigid rules, where the master truly performs in front of an audience. Lastly, *chaji*, or the 'high tea gathering', typically lasts from four to eight hours, with four guests who know each other and are well-versed in the practice (Holland 2000).

For my concern, the latter is especially worth exploring as its procedures clarify the underlying aesthetics. The rough script is the following. After a few preliminary actions, the guests enter the tea room in order of importance, observe the utensils chosen for making tea, and take their seats. The host enters and, after formal greetings, begins to serve a light meal (*kaiseki*) followed by a moist sweet (*omogashi*). Before the ceremony's most solemn part, the guests return outside, to the relaxation area. Again, they enter and comment on the instruments while the host prepares the thick tea (*koicha*). The main guest drinks first before passing the cup to the others. All converse about the meaning of the rite. The preparation of the thin tea (*usucha*) and the serving of dry sweets (*higashi*) follow in a more relaxed phase where guests can inquire

about the tools used. Eventually the guests bow to the host, who bows in turn and watches them leaving.

In *chaji*, key elements are the unique relationship between the participants, and the pervasive sense of impermanence or imperfection within the ritual. Soshitsu's reflection on *ningen* provides a useful starting point to delineate the roles of hosts and guests. *Ningen*(人間) – i.e. person – literally means the space between one person and another, indicating that one becomes truly human only in relation to the other.[1] This concept is central to the tea practice, where there is neither performer nor audience but only mutual interaction. The Zen expression *muhinshu* (無賓主), composed of *mu* (無, void), *hin* (賓, guest), and *shu* (主, host), encapsulates the idea that "Through sympathetic coordination, host and guest become one": there is no distinction between them, and harmony transcends their roles (Soshitsu 1979, p. 40). Aesthetic involvement is fundamental, but must be collective; otherwise, the ceremony fails. Tea practice represents a tacit mode of aesthetic communion carried out through imitation, observation, and performance. This underscores its many social functions, including the transmission of values, the mitigation of conflicts through a sense of fairness, and the establishment of a consensus within the specific event. By encouraging a sense of *communitas*, this liminal experience offers relief from social obligations in a rigidly structured society (Ludwig 1989, p. 95). Moreover, through the bonds it cultivates, the ceremony blurs the distinction not only between performer and audience but also between production and consumption. As such, the role of the individual artist is impossible since the aesthetic experience is a collaborative co-creation, where all contribute to the formation of meaning and the evocation of feelings (Saito 2007a, p. 127).

By aspiring to this kind of social egalitarianism, tea ceremony embraces and elevates imperfection to an aesthetic ideal, adding a sociopolitical layer to it (Saito 1997), and facilitating an appreciation of ordinary activities by imbuing them with aesthetic significance. In this light, the food, the tea, as well as the very actions of eating and drinking are integral. Embracing uncertainty, perishability, and the transience of all things, the ceremony venerates human agency in imparting value to imperfection and contingency, paradoxically rendering them contradictory and deliberately sought after. Indeed, despite humanity's assertive agency over events, the ceremony extols spontaneity and the ephemeral nature of the self, embodied in sequential gestures. Thus, the concept of im-

[1] Regarding *ningen*, many reflections can be found in Watsuji's (2015) study on climate and ethics.

permanence revolves neither on individual objects nor on artistic motifs but on the occasion itself, constituting 'an art without an artwork', where various elements – objects, spaces, temporalities – are synaesthetically appreciated in that precise moment. Even if in *chanoyu* numerous arts converge, its essence does not lie in the appreciation of objects or gestures per se but in their relationality. Just as everyday reality comprises relational configurations instead of discrete objects, the ceremony embeds relationality at its core.[2] Primacy is to be accorded not to a reified state of perfection; rather, to the ongoing, incomplete, and imperfect process towards perfection. Imperfection permeates every facet of the ceremony, epitomizing the acceptance of the uncontrollable aspects of existence (Saito 1997, p. 383) that, beset by difficulty, irregularity or impermanence, finds validation through its aestheticization, from the meticulous arrangement of *kaiseki* meal to the nuanced flavour of *matcha* the ceremony culminates in.

All this foregrounds the non-objective, implicit, and operative aesthetic perspective tied to this performance. Its contradictory features exemplify the contingent conception inherent in Japanese aesthetics, which often blends rigid formal rules with the expression of the impermanence of everything. As fundamental elements of *chanoyu*, food and tea help interpret the ambivalent relationality in such aesthetic modality whose taste is rooted in a complementary harmony. Its aesthetic experience is indeed *bittersweet*, together perfect and imperfect. To fully grasp it, the role of *kaiseki*, *wagashi* and *matcha* must be deeper scrutinized.

3. Kaiseki*: A Paradigm*

In the *Nanpōroku* (南方録), Sen No Rikyū asserts that scarce and bland food represents the truest flavour and deepest beauty, not because desirable but because more authentic.[3] Along with *toriawase*, 'the artful selection and arrangement' of ingredients, constant repetition is a key trait of *kaiseki* cuisine. Rikyū emphasizes simplicity and rusticity as food was exclusively meant to prevent

[2] For the concept of a radical relationality embedded in *chanoyu*, in connection with Nishida's philosophy, see Greco (2023). On the configuration of *chanoyu* as a synesthetic art, I am grateful for the valuable insights and exchanges with the scholar in Japanese aesthetics Lorenzo Marinucci, who is extensively exploring these topics.

[3] *Nanpōroku* is considered one of the most significant texts on the practice of tea and is attributed to Sen No Rikyū, probably the most important promulgator of *chanoyu*, and the mythological reformer of *cha kaiseki*. For a deeper understanding of it, see Varley & Kumakura (1989), Rath (2013).

people from fainting during the long ritual. This seemingly narrow perspective appears to disregard the importance *kaiseki* has gradually attained, becoming synonymous with fine dining, not only in Japan. Indeed, *kaiseki* is today marked by perfection and sophistication; accordingly, it is now the paradigm of Japanese refined taste.

There is little doubt that today's Japanese cuisine has its origins in tea practices. *Cha kaiseki*, the ceremonial cuisine, has developed from the late 1500s onwards (Rath 2016, p. 34). The word *kaiseki* can be written by using two pairs of kanji: the binomial 懐石 stands for 'stone in the robe', originally referred to the hot stone Zen monks pressed onto their stomachs to stave off hunger and cold, while 会席 stands for 'formal occasion' (Tan 2009). Despite its humble beginnings, *kaiseki* involves painstaking attention to every detail, representing the highest level of meal preparation; akin to an innovative form of banqueting, it has promoted a paradigm shift that affected domestically and internationally the evolution of Japanese cuisine. Its cornerstone principles entail selecting the finest ingredients, eschewing repetition of cooking techniques, ensuring each dish is served at its optimal temperature, maintaining equal emphasis on taste and presentation, and fostering a harmonious relationship with the environment (Cwiertka & Yasuhara 2020, p. 101). However, *kaiseki* meal follows the guidelines of every banquet in Japan, which encompass time (a ceremony can span an entire day), meticulousness (each aspect is carefully arranged to cultivate an imperceptible harmony), and the imperative to never distract the guests. The latter aspect is cardinal in Japanese aesthetics, where keeping the guest engaged arises from the combination of two elements: the flawless emulation of nature, albeit subtly executed, and the corresponding freedom – indeed, necessity – for the spectators' imagination. Japanese art is renowned for *suggesting* rather than overtly *displaying*, leaving room to observers' interpretation. Echoing Dōgen's insights on cooking, there's a poignant reference to Zen principles, according to which meticulous attention to detail should permeate even the most rudimentary tasks such as rinsing rice. For this reason, Kumakura (1989, p. 58) claims that *kaiseki* cuisine is inherently *humanistic* as it embodies a heightened sensitivity.

Furthermore, in *chanoyu* every element must align with the specific occasion and prevailing season. Seasonality assumes a particularly interesting role as not solely dictated by climates but revolving around fixed ingredients corresponding to apparently immutable seasons. The ceremony does not embrace meteorological conditions, fostering a sense of discomfort as participants, regardless of external factors, adapt to the circumstances of *that* time (Saito 2007a,

p. 129). In resonance with Dōgen's teachings, one must embrace seasonal changes as part of a unified whole, avoiding narrow joys for spring or melancholy for autumn, yet appreciating the relative qualities from a broader perspective.

Kaiseki has shaped Japanese culinary evolutions and tea practice also for its focus on food's appearance. Japanese cuisine is often acclaimed as primarily a visual art form, to the extent that taste would be suggested by the dishes' look. Indeed, the meal presentation emerges as its hallmark since 1900: the distinctive traits consist in "plain" flavours and colours, yet composed of intricate textures, and the harmonious shapes integrated with minimalist tableware. This plethora of attributes endows *kaiseki* with its artistic and philosophical essence, making it paradigmatic of a recognizable 'Japanese taste'. Even within the ritual, the significance of food is undeniable. Thus, the creation of a specific meal for the ceremony is interpreted as one of the key factors behind *chanoyu*'s rise to such a prominent cultural status in Japanese society.

4. Matcha *and* Wagashi*, or On Bittersweet*

"*Zencha ichimi* (禅茶一味)": the taste of tea and Zen are one and the same, stated Rikyū's grandson and tea master Sen Sōtan (Soshitsu 1979, p. 61). Here 'taste' refers both to the subtle, persistent flavour of tea and the atmosphere surrounding this practice. Soshitsu stresses that Zen is not merely meditation, rather the daily realization of non-duality achievable in the simple act of drinking tea, which concurrently transcends consumption. Many scholars agree that during *chanoyu* tea is primarily drunk neither for its taste nor properties, but as a medium to foster harmony among participants and with nature.[4]

The ceremonial drink is *matcha*, a herbaceous and astringent powdered green tea. Unlike regular tea infusion, which is commonly consumed without any rigid codification, *matcha* has profoundly influenced Japanese material culture, also leading to a kind of 'monocultural' conspicuous consumption. Within the ritual, it is drunk in two forms: *koicha*, thicker and denser, and the lighter *usucha*. Besides the harmonic function of tea during *chanoyu*, one of the most omitted and intriguing aspects concerns its effects. While Suzuki states that it "keeps the mind fresh and vigilant, but it does not intoxicate" (2018, p. 56), Anderson (1987, p. 495) argues that

[4] See: Anderson (1987); Pitelka (2007); Tollini (2014).

it acts as a remedy against life's anxieties by infusing tranquility. While these observations acknowledge the multiple physiological properties attributed to tea, they tend to underestimate its actual stimulant effects – especially in powdered form – which have long been used by Buddhist monks to stay awake during meditation for its strong exciting power (Pitelka 2007, p. 4). The multifaceted role of *matcha* underscores its central place in the physical and spiritual dimensions of the ceremony, making it similar to rituals where the participants' state of consciousness is altered. Here's why tea becomes a form of spiritual upliftment and serves as a bridging drink: the act of preparing and consuming it links everyday life with the most complex Buddhist philosophical concepts (Okakura 1964; Anderson 1987, p. 478); concurrently, tea not only symbolizes and gives meaning to ordinary actions, but concretely enables the participants' transformation. All the symbols unfolding during the ceremony are concentrated within its flavours and its effects.

The astringency of tea finds balance in the delicate taste of accompanying sweets. Japan's relationship with confectionery carries a profound yet overlooked nature. When sugar first made its way to Japan, it was believed to possess medicinal properties, making it a valuable commodity. Imports of it increased from the 16th century, but for many years sugar remained a luxury food. Actual production in Japan began during the Edo period, a time of prosperity when tea drinking became a common practice among warriors and merchants. As trade between China and Japan grew, sugar became a common item leading also to the production of *wagashi*, often cited as the main reason Japanese today can endure such long ceremonies (Rath & Watanabe 2023, p. 3). In *chaji*, two types of *wagashi* are served: *omogashi*, before *koicha*, sliced with a special wooden pick, and *higashi*, dry sweets eaten with the fingers in the final part of the ritual. Both classified as 'ceremonial sweets', they create a nice contrast with the taste of tea and are often the only gift guests can offer to the host. *Wagashi* are imbued with delicate flavours that reflect the current season and environment, captivating through their taste, visual appeal, and texture. Concurrently, they evoke imaginative responses, as their names are often associated with natural scenes. Their symbolism is comprehensible only within the specific ceremony, thereby transcending their often-abstract appearance.

In many rituals, confectionery hold a peculiar significance and, more than any other food, it reflects a genuine and intimate care for others. The Japanese word for 'sweet', *amai* (甘い), shares the same kanji as *amae* (甘え), which encapsulates a complex sentiment

of dependence, longing for being pampered and indulgence in both caring for others and being cared for. A renowned albeit very reductionist study about it was that of neuropsychologist Takeo Doi (1971). *Amaeru* (甘える) is the intransitive verb corresponding to the noun *amae*. It epitomizes the essence of relational dynamics, the idea of relying on and presupposing the love and care of others, embodying the peculiar trait of sweetness as an ambivalent taste/emotion. Doi contended this yearning for dependent affection constitutes one of the features of Japanese culture, setting it apart from Western individualism. My hypothesis is that this nurturing attitude finds one of its most significant aesthetic expressions in *chanoyu*, whereby the Buddhist 'interdependence' of everything is also expressed as dependence – *amae*. The sensation of being cared for and entrusted, even in a seemingly implicit manner, manifests itself particularly in the attentiveness towards the guest who concurrently seeks and requires it. It is a reciprocal attitude and sentiment: *amae* and hospitality reside in the collaboration between the participants to create a harmonious atmosphere. The link between hospitality and dependence lays the groundwork for a deeper understanding of the ethical dimensions in the ceremony. *Amae* primarily signifies a transcendence of the self while simultaneously affirming it in the relationship. The tea ceremony communicates the host's care through aesthetic means (Saito 2017, p. 151), while the participant's transformation unfolds through its consumption. In its turn, the sweet experience extends beyond the ceremony's culmination and plays a symbolic role at the moment of farewell: offering a final *higashi* serves as a transitional stage, legitimizing the guests' return to the mundane world (Surak 2013, p. 50).[5]

5. *Performative Taste*

The tea ceremony stands as a unique performance that aligns with daily life' rhythm offering a non-Western perspective on art integrated into the aesthetics of everyday. Taste transcends gustatory perception by encompassing the whole atmosphere. In the ceremony the intricate interplay between consumption and contemplation, emblematic of taste's liminality, is revealed.

[5] As Ota Toru also explained to me: "I make a two-dimensional sketch of the main theme, select the ingredients according to the taste of the guests, and translate it into a 50-gram sweet sculpture, so I never make the same confectionery. A *wagashi*, which symbolizes the main theme of the ceremony, serves to leave an image of it in the guest's impression, so 'one moment, one meeting' becomes exactly 'one tea, one confectionery'" (private conversation, November 2023).

Kondo's thesis (1985) posits that ritual is both a performative and communicative act, defining the ceremony as the ritualized version of the common interaction between host and guest, and an amplified expression of manners' significance in Japanese culture. In *chanoyu*, both the master and the guest contribute to the savoured taste and a perfect performance occurs only when both parties possess the necessary understanding and cognition. This underscores the ceremony as a form of 'co-performing', where everyone is a participant. Indeed, the meal takes here on a formal connotation, and even the act of drinking tea is different from its everyday consumption; the focus shifts from the taste of tea to the taste of the entire experience (Saito 2007a, p. 36). Its appreciation is intertwined with the overall atmosphere, and participants consciously engage in something heightened. If this alone equates the ceremony with a work of art is arguable. Perhaps the dominance of ritual over artistic expression makes it a distinct realm, wherein tea assumes primacy because of the attention paid to it. The intensity of sensory stimuli escalates throughout the ceremony: from the lightest drink and incense to the richest meal and sweetest confectionery, culminating in the strongest bitterness of tea and most saccharine morsels. Yet, sensory qualities are here neither vehicles nor signs for meaning, but are themselves meaningful as evenemential relationships. Taste also transmits the aesthetic principle of *wabi*, where attention to emptiness imbues rhythm and contributes to a sort of holistic experience (Surak 2013, p. 50). Similar to the 18th-century Western aesthetic shift, that redefined taste from a mere bodily sense to a capacity for judgment, in the ceremony, taste functions as a bridge between the sensory experience of food and tea and the ideal of 'good taste'. This broader notion of taste forms the basis of *chanoyu*'s philosophy. Unlike Western conceptions, which emphasize the intellectual and imaginative capacities of the perceiver, taste in this context is composed of normative guidelines, necessary for it to become the expression of a shared feeling between performer and audience. In the broader socio-cultural context of Japanese daily life, this normativity, central to the tea ceremony, is also valued and reflected in various forms, most notably in the asymmetrical and contingent sense of harmony that defines practices such as meal arrangements, packaging, and garden design.[6]

[6] About the role of taste in the broader Japanese context see: Surak (2013); Saito (2007b). Unfortunately, a deeper exploration of the multivalency of taste was beyond the scope of this discussion. However, it would be interesting to further investigate the performative aspects of taste by examining the interplay between gustatory and metaphorical (or 'refined') taste in Japanese aesthetics. A comparative analysis between Western and Japanese perspectives on this theme would also offer valuable insights. For an intriguing connection of *chanoyu* performativity with the notion of *rasa* in Natyasatra theater, see Holland (2000).

Moreover, the various objects used in the ritual are not valuable per se; they do not hold significance in isolation but acquire meaning as they become mediums of relationships within a specific occasion. As symbolic extensions of the host, they form "a 'bundle of relations' with considerable symbolic impact" (Kondo 1985, p. 297, 299). Each object is activated within the specific relational environment, becoming a metaphor for the entire ceremony. Taste and food actively participate as well, blurring the lines between tasters and tasted, between the material and the cognitive. Especially with *wagashi*, guests should *savour* the representation of the host's values and feelings. The celebration of this ritual creates a participatory experience imbued with an atmospheric quality that extends beyond these sweet miniature sculptures to actively engage the taster.

In *chanoyu*, food and tea occupy a unique space where consumption and contemplation blend rather than being mutually exclusive. Also thanks to both the peculiarity of taste and the perishable nature of food, overly linear and totalizing conceptions of the ceremony can be avoided. Often understood as a static monolith, *chanoyu* risks of being frozen as a symbol of 'Japanese cultural essence', immutable rather than contingent and processual (Pitelka 2007).

Tea is still today the iconic drink of the Japanese, daily consumed and found in cans at all vending machines. However, during the ceremony, it becomes a *tea beyond tea*, a taste of the atmosphere, a social and communal event, a physical and spiritual transformation.[7] In this regard, Saito (2007a, p. 38) addresses a paradox, namely the celebration of an everyday activity isolated from the everyday itself. This isolation would make the participant more aware of the ordinary qualities of the action being performed. The special moment departs from the mundane but cannot do without it; simultaneously, it fits into the paradigm art has always respond to, somehow detaching itself from the ordinary. The simple act of preparing and drinking tea is elevated to a refined art form, and a sublimation of the everyday. Celebrating impermanence and consisting of mundane actions, *chanoyu* renders them artistic.

Within this framework, taste amplifies the fact that there are no individual aesthetic subjects but only collective ones. There is no contemplation of objects in themselves but of objects in their use and relationality. Moreover, it is precisely in the repetition of its codes that the possibility of transcendence and transformation lies, allowing guests to elevate their thoughts. A cup of tea in *sadō*

[7] For an in-depth analysis of the transformative power of the performing arts, see Fischer-Lichte (2008).

is more than just a normal cup of tea: it is a concentrated performative experience while still retaining the taste and vitality of an everyday cup of tea.

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