

CROSS-CURRENTS



EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

REVIEW ESSAY

A Nation, a World, in a Bowl of Tea

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Fujimori Terunobu. 藤森照信. *Fujimori Terunobu no Chashitsugaku: Nihon no Kyokushō Kūkan no Nazo* [Fujimori Terunobu's tearoom studies: The riddle of Japan's smallest space]. 藤森照信の茶室学。日本の極小空間の謎. Tokyo: Rikuyosha, 2012. 296 pp. ¥3,000 (cloth).

Surak, Kristin. *Making Tea, Making Japan: Cultural Nationalism in Practice*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012. 272 pp. \$85 (cloth), \$25 (paper/ebook).

A kimono. A tatami floor. A bowl.

Together, these objects almost instantly evoke the Japanese tea ceremony, though they are seen throughout society: kimonos are worn for parties or weddings, tatami floors are as often as not found in inexpensive lodgings, and bowls of rice are served with almost every meal.

Early on in her careful study *Making Tea, Making Japan: Cultural Nationalism in Practice*, Kristin Surak says, “The Japaneseness encoded in tea places, captured in tea objects, and patterned into tea movements can be interpreted and experienced as quintessentially Japanese by the Japanese themselves because it is different—but not completely removed—from mundane aspects of life.” (18). Surak’s greatest strength is her awareness of the factors that inform the tea ceremony’s central place in Japanese society, from commercial structures allowing the seamless delivery of the objects and architecture of tea anywhere on the globe, to the casual use of history—not always accurate—deployed in a Sunday lesson.

As a visitor to Japan, Surak discovered that the tea ceremony offered a unique opportunity to transcend a deeply integrated inclination by the Japanese to draw distinctions between natives and nonnatives. Through coaching and studied movement, Surak became adept

at the poses and structures of the Ura Senke school and entered an unusually liminal state, one in which those around her sometimes seemed to forget her foreignness. Surak sees something in this evolution that others have not, and it is at the core of her book: the tea ceremony is not only a culturally rich performance incorporating many of Japan's other important arts—ceramics, calligraphy, flower arranging, traditional fashion and fabric design, architecture and gardens, food—but a performance so structured that it eclipses the individuality of its actors. It no longer mattered that Surak is not Japanese; her accomplished participation expressed something deeply indigenous to Japan. She could effortlessly follow tea's constricted choreography—moving modestly in a kimono, crossing a tatami floor without stepping on borders, holding a bowl lightly in her hands—even as others around her, including most Japanese, could not.

Throughout the book, Surak presents a divided self: the tea practitioner studying the refinements of placing a valued object properly versus the foreign researcher with unusually free access. One indulgence she openly acknowledges is her mobility. While those around her might find it difficult to attend tea ceremonies in other places or by other schools, Surak was permitted that freedom, noting in her preface that she spent extensive time with tea participants from the Omote Senke, Mushanokōji Senke, Edo Senke, Dainihon Sadō Gakkai, and Seki Shū schools. Each school has developed internal differences that define it against the others, but Surak is interested less in the distinctions between tea schools than in their commonalities.

Chief among these commonalities is their shared history, extending back centuries in time, but equally important is their role today, schooling the less socially secure in the central aspects of a deeply resonant cultural practice, a role first taken up with the expansion of the middle classes in Japan's Meiji era. Surak draws attention to the manner in which the tea schools, each led by a priest-like *iemoto*, involve two constituencies: casually centralized international elites who ornament and elevate the social status of each school, and others—women, the middle class—who hope to find their own social security in the less aristocratic ranks. Surak explains how each school of tea reaches out to ambassadors and business leaders through contemporary programs deployed under the flag of “Peace in a Bowl of Tea,” suggesting a central position in politics and international exchange that echoes tea's use by savage shoguns in an earlier era. Cosmopolitan tea ceremonies are today broadcast within both the schools and the mass media.

Yet Surak shrewdly sees that the strict hierarchy of these schools allows their laity few opportunities for more than a moment with its loftiest orders, in spite of the exorbitant sums

devotees pay to be a part of these societies. She is at her most biting as she describes the way an *iemoto* is whisked through a large and hungry crowd, and at her most touching when she describes the mundane moments of a lower-level adherent such as herself. But as Surak also points out, even the earlier and most esteemed authorities on tea, such as Sen no Rikyū were merely employed by the aristocracy, not of it—a point no less true for the *iemoto* today.

Surak's book is broken into four sections, presenting the physical expression of tea, its pedagogy, its history, and its institutional structure. Surak draws widely from literature in a variety of fields: her bibliography begins with an article on Indian wrestling and Hindu militancy and ends with a 1989 book on gender. But while the book's intellectual influences are broad, its outlines, reflecting her situation while researching it, are quite narrow. Surak sticks to the central story of tea today and is even mildly derisive of approaches that are less rigorous regarding comportment and training—conceding, for example, that a looser approach to tea inspired by Rikyū is “not uncommon,” but dismissing it as mere “nostalgia for a more aesthetically liberated past” (169–170).

While most publications on tea are far more esoteric in scope than Surak's book, Fujimori Terunobu's 2012 *Fujimori Terunobu no Chashitsugaku* (Fujimori Terunobu's tearoom studies), published only in Japanese, takes a similarly encompassing approach. However, comparing the two books also raises important differences.

Fujimori, who was a professor at the University of Tokyo for decades, is best known in Japanese studies circles as a historian with a deep knowledge of the architecture of the Meiji era. He is a regular presence in Japan's mass media and has authored dozens of popular books—though the volume discussed here is more scholarly in tone than many. Additionally, over the last two decades, many have come to know him as the designer and builder of funky teahouses and tearooms found around the world—spaces designed to accommodate the casual, retro- Rikyū approach to tea that Surak dismisses.

Surak is young, foreign, and female—a scholar establishing a reputation in the social sciences. Fujimori is older, established, and an insider. She enacts the tea ceremony; he is a maker and a builder.

Both authors agree on the historical outlines describing how the tea ceremony was shaped and by whom. But Surak unwinds this history in order to identify the points where practices became the norm—where, as she says, “good tea” became “proper tea” (92). Fujimori, telling the

same tale, is less interested in practice than in the innovators involved—especially Rikyū, the progenitor of today’s Ura Senke, Omote Senke, and Mushakōji Senke schools of tea. Fujimori’s chapter 3, titled “Rikyū’s Tearooms,” comprises over 60 pages of the 290-page book (followed by a chapter entitled simply “After Rikyū”) and highlights two approaches to tea: one rigid and hierarchical and the other openly eccentric. These two branches, Fujimori argues, reflect the inclinations of the two powerful shoguns whom Rikyū served, Nobunaga and Hideyoshi.

For Surak, the history of the tea ceremony seems to have reached its end in the Edo era. By the middle of the nineteenth century, her story shifts from the development of the tea ceremony and its spaces to its institutions and their value in terms of politics or prestige. Fujimori, embracing tea’s eccentric and informal edges and using architecture as his lens, continues onward to today: tea spaces for early twentieth-century *sukisha* (tea connoisseurs) opened out onto manicured lawns, inspired by European styles, such as the Bauhaus and De Stijl; mannerist postwar rooms designed by Shirai Seiichi incorporated odd window fragments; Kuma Kengo’s art installations were as often as not an excuse for experimentation with unusual building materials. Then, briefly, near the end of his final chapter, Fujimori shares his own slightly strange take on tearooms—spaces speared on stilts with ladders leading to little doors in floors or tea served on a tiny boat floating idyllically on a lake somewhere on the island of Taiwan.

An interview at the end of the book is positioned like an epilogue, with Fujimori speaking with another internationally known architect, Isozaki Arata. It is entitled “Da kara, Chashitsu ha Yamerarenai” (So we can’t quit the tearoom).

In this interview, Isozaki positions his own work within the international world of contemporary art, emphasizing another point that Fujimori has made throughout his book: while the tea ceremony can be framed as an enigmatic national practice, it would be wrong to treat it as one that is isolated from the influences and actions of the world at large. Isozaki discusses his tearooms in terms of abstraction or asymmetry and recalls their installation in galleries and museums at home and abroad. He explains how one tearoom, intended for John Lennon and Yoko Ono, managed to go astray as a result of the couple’s tax problems in England (250–253).

Throughout his book, Fujimori is comfortable offering up contemporary referents by way of explanation. Rikyū’s concept that the whole world can exist in a bowl of tea is held up against a 1963 artwork by Akasegawa Genpei; the artist placed a label within, and thus argued he had

enclosed the entire universe in a tiny can (115). Tea-tasting contests where warriors were challenged to identify the *terroir* of tea are compared to competitions entered by sommeliers today (046).

Fujimori explains that tea originated in India (as does Surak), but he argues that it has international cohorts on the world stage, explaining that as tea spread to China, England, and Japan its cost and unusual character as a stimulant often encouraged unusual expression. Tea in England, Fujimori says, is about time—a lingering, special time of sweets and sandwiches served on pretty porcelain. Tea in Taiwan or China is about fragrance and an epicurean attention to steeping; he is surprised to discover that one merchant known for the ancient provenance of his wares sells not old bowls or other artifacts but aged tea (022). At times, Fujimori seems to joke too broadly about these variations in tea practices, yet overall his arguments underscore an international perspective.

The tea in Surak's bowl is bright green *matcha* whipped with a whisk; Fujimori's is steeped *sencha* heated over a tiny bed of coals. Fujimori's funky tea seems to be the antithesis of the refined practices Surak strives to embody. Only occasionally does a communicant in Fujimori's tea space wear a kimono, and there is no reason to worry about treading on the silk borders of a tatami, because his floors are usually finished in other, more modest, materials. Fujimori's tea is one that can accept outside influences; Surak's sits complacently at the center of an industry built on centuries of history. Surak shares the conventions of tea; Fujimori celebrates its unconventional fringes.

But these are not so much two poles as two sides of the same story. Without its most esoteric core, it is unlikely that Fujimori's funkier form of tea would attract much interest. Surak's book offers a scholarly story of choreography and commercialization and will find its way into future dissertations and onto the shelves of school libraries, but Fujimori's book is the one more likely to be spotted on a train or a plane—tea's tale told by a skilled storyteller.

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