

DRAFT

Okakura Kakuzo

The Book of Tea

Introduction by Bruce Richardson

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As a Stream Runs Through Grass: An Introduction

By Bruce Richardson

In his 1897 book, *An Artist's Letters from Japan*, American John La Farge paid homage to his Japanese friend and guide Okakura Kakuzo by penning a dedication that read:

Okakura San: I wish to put your name before these notes, written at the time when I first met you, because the memories of your talks are connected with my liking of your country and of its story, and because for a time you were Japan to me. I hope, too, that some thoughts of yours will be detected in what I write, as a stream runs through grass—hidden, perhaps, but always there.

Nine years later, Okakura Kakuzo published *The Book of Tea*, his third book in English, with this simple inscription: “To John La Farge, Sensei.” The Japanese term “sensei” is used to show respect to someone who has achieved a high level of mastery in an art form.

The charismatic influence of Okakura Kakuzo was indeed the common stream that flowed through the lives of La Farge and so many leading intellectuals of the Gilded Age. Some called him “tenshin” or “teacher” while others simply fell under his spell at New York dinner parties or Boston lectures. Countless artists, whether contemporaries or those who followed, were influenced by his illuminating insight into Japanese aesthetics such as “wabi” and “teaism.” But Okakura’s remarkable story, and the *Book of Tea*, might not have unfolded had it not been for a common item found in nineteenth-century New England homes and businesses. No, that item wasn’t tea—it was whale oil.

Coming of The Black Ships

On July 8, 1853, Japanese residents living on the outskirts of Edo, the sprawling capital of feudal Japan, beheld a surprising sight. American warships, without benefit of sails, had entered their harbor under a cloud of black smoke. The expedition included two coal-burning steamships under the command of Commodore Matthew Calbraith Perry, younger brother of Oliver Hazard Perry, hero of the American victory over the British on Lake Erie in 1813.



The Spermacetti Whale by J. Stewart, 1837, Massachusetts, New Bedford Whaling Museum

Herman Melville's epic novel *Moby Dick* had been published two years prior. American machinery was lubricated with the leviathan's oil, and whale bones gave shape to American fashion. Whaling ships from ports such as Salem and Nantucket had for decades made the long and dangerous journey around the continent of South America, past the Hawaiian Islands, and into the fish-filled waters surrounding Japan. But foreign mariners were forbidden to seek shelter or supplies from the Japanese islands. And doom was sure to befall any shipwrecked sailor who fell into the hands of the inhabitants of what Melville called "that double-bolted land, Japan."

Portuguese and other European trading ships. Francis Xavier and other Spanish Jesuits had arrived on the heels of the early traders. Soon Protestant missionaries followed their Catholic rivals and, by the early seventeenth century, converts to Christianity were calculated to number many tens of thousands. Japan seemed poised to join in the great age of overseas expansion until all this international goodwill came to an abrupt end in 1639. The ruling warrior government, fearful of the influence of the foreign

Trade relations had not always been this icy. For much of the sixteenth century, Japan had engaged in robust relations with Portuguese and other European trading ships. Francis Xavier and other Spanish Jesuits had arrived on the heels of the early traders. Soon Protestant missionaries followed their Catholic rivals and, by the early seventeenth century, converts to Christianity were calculated to number many tens of thousands. Japan seemed poised to join in the great age of overseas expansion until all this international goodwill came to an abrupt end in 1639. The ruling warrior government, fearful of the influence of the foreign "white devils," adopted a strict closed-country policy. Japanese citizens were forbidden to travel abroad, foreigners were expelled, and Christian worship was outlawed. Citizens who had converted were forced to deny their new religion or be



The Arrival of Southern Barbarians, seventeenth-century Japanese folding screen, Idemitsu Museum of Arts

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cruelly punished. Japan became a hermit country, and her doors remained tightly shut for over two centuries until President Millard Fillmore dispatched Commodore Perry to wedge them open again.

One of the primary objectives of Perry's expedition was the demand that castaways be treated humanely, and whalers and other American vessels be provided with one or two ports of call with access to coal, provisions, and water. Perry's visit lasted only four days. The Americans were courteous, yet firm. The Commodore promised to return shortly to make sure their new Japanese friends acquiesced to President Fillmore's "modest invitation" to once again enter into international trade.

The astonished warrior leaders in Edo quickly recognized that they had no alternative but to submit to Perry's demands. They had not actually fought any wars for almost two-and-a-half centuries, and they lacked the navy and firepower to resist.

Perry made good on his promise and entered the port of Yokohama on March 8, 1854, with nine vessels, over 100 mounted guns, and a crew of close to 1,800. Not a shot had to be fired before treaties were signed, gifts exchanged, and photographs taken. Sleepy Japan and the small fishing village of Yokohama stood on the cusp of phenomenal change. In the new age of steam-driven vessels, the voyage between California and Japan could be traversed in an astonishing eighteen days. For Japan, there would be no turning back.

Awakened Boy

Yokohama's long waterfront quickly filled with the offices and depots of foreign traders who came in droves to take advantage of the untapped resources Japan had to offer. A European-style hotel and customs houses were erected as broad avenues were laid out in orderly Western grids. But like any boom town, the city had its less organized sections where makeshift warehouses, shops, and beer halls sprang up to service a voracious sea-going economy. One new enterprise was the Okakura Silk Store, managed by a samurai named Okakura Kanemon and his second wife, Kono.

It was into this silk store that a baby boy was born on December 26, 1862. He was named "Kakuzo," which literally means "warehouse at the corner." As a small boy, Kakuzo did not care for this simple name and he later adopted Chinese characters for the same word but with a changed meaning, "awakened boy." The improvised moniker was a hint of what the precocious child would become.



Yokohama Street, photograph by T. Enami, Japan, c. 1895



The Tea Plantation at Katakura in Province Suruga from The Thirty-six Views of Mt. Fuji, 1830, Katsushika Hokusai

The Cup of Humanity

Tea began as a medicine and grew into a beverage. In China, in the eighth century, it entered the realm of poetry as one of the polite amusements. The fifteenth century saw Japan ennoble it into a religion of aestheticism—Teaism. Teaism is a cult founded on the adoration of the beautiful among the sordid facts of everyday existence. It inculcates purity and harmony, the mystery of mutual charity, the romanticism of the social order. It is essentially a worship of the Imperfect, as it is a tender attempt to accomplish something possible in this impossible thing we know as life.

The Philosophy of Tea is not mere aestheticism in the ordinary acceptance of the term, for it expresses conjointly with ethics and religion our whole point of view about man and nature. It is hygiene, for it enforces cleanliness; it is economics, for it shows comfort in simplicity rather than in the complex and costly; it is moral geometry, inasmuch as it defines our sense of proportion to the universe. It represents the true spirit of Eastern democracy by making all its votaries aristocrats in taste.



Under Mannen Bridge at Fukagawa from The Thirty-six Views of Mt. Fuji, 1830, Katsushika Hokusai

The Schools of Tea

Tea is a work of art and needs a master hand to bring out its noblest qualities. We have good and bad tea, as we have good and bad paintings—generally the latter. There is no single recipe for making the perfect tea, as there are no rules for producing a Titian or a Sesson. Each preparation of the leaves has its individuality, its special affinity with water and heat, its own method of telling a story. The truly beautiful must be always in it. How much do we not suffer through the constant failure of society to recognize this simple and fundamental law of art and life; Lichilai, a Sung poet, has sadly remarked that there were three most deplorable things in the world: the spoiling of fine youths through false education, the degradation of fine paintings through vulgar admiration, and the utter waste of fine tea through incompetent manipulation.

Like Art, Tea has its periods and its schools. Its evolution may be roughly divided into three main stages: the Boiled Tea, the Whipped Tea, and the Steeped Tea. We moderns belong to the last school. These several methods of appreciating the beverage are indicative of the spirit of the age in which they prevailed. For life is an expression, our unconscious actions the constant betrayal of our innermost thought. Confucius said that “man hideth not.” Perhaps we reveal ourselves too much in small things because we have so

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Japanese Tea Exports In the Late 1800s

By Bruce Richardson

Commodore Perry's "Black Ships" opened the port of Yokohama in 1859 for the benefit of the United States whaling industry but, within a few years, Pennsylvania kerosene, rather than whale oil, was lighting American homes. The great hunting ships were idle and rotting in harbors across the eastern seaboard. Sailors who once went to sea to battle the great leviathans of the Pacific were now employed to man ships that carried a more docile commodity: Japanese green tea. In the first year of legal trade, 400,000 tons of Japanese teas were exported.

As soon as Japan's gates were pried open, the United States became her best tea customer. This was due to the direct transpacific shipping routes to Seattle and San Francisco, and to America's insatiable thirst for green tea.

In 1860, American merchants were importing ten percent of their tea from Japan. By 1870, the number had grown to twenty-five percent, and by 1880, Japanese tea accounted for forty-seven percent of America's tea imports while China supplied most of the balance. By 1890, the per capita consumption of tea in America was 1.3 pounds (compared to 7.8 pounds of coffee).

On the other side of the world, Great Britain's tastes continued in favor of the black teas emerging from their newly-planted gardens in India and Ceylon. The empire built on the black tea ritual never acquired a taste for the lighter Japanese green teas. Besides, what good was it if you couldn't add milk to your cup?

