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A Cup of Humanity between East and West

on Okakura Tenshin's The Book of Tea

It was exactly 100 years ago that a tiny book by a Japanese writer was published in New York. The book was titled *The Book of Tea*, and the author was Okakura Kakuzo, commonly known as Okakura Tenshin, his nom de plume. *The Book of Tea* was not simply a book that Okakura wrote directly in English for Western readers to explain the culture of Japan or Asia. Rather it was something that could be called a manifesto. In the book he indeed described a tradition of what he called "Teaism," that is, the ceremony of tea or the way of tea. Yet this was only because he regarded Teaism as the essence of Oriental culture (as opposed to the Occidental), ultimately expressing its fundamental thought; Teaism, according to Tenshin, encompassed Taoism, Zen Buddhism and even cultural traditions in Japan.

Okakura Tenshin was not a philosopher in the sense that Kuki Shuzo and Nishida Kitaro, of whom my colleagues have already spoken, were philosophers. He was a man of knowledge before the word *tetsugaku* became established as the Japanese translation of "philosophy" and was accepted as a discipline at universities. He was an intellectual at the dawn of Japan's modernity. The University of Tokyo, to which we belong, was founded on the basis of Tokyo Kaisei Gakko in 1877. The fifteen-year-old Okakura was one of the first to study in the Faculty of Literature at the university. He was only eighteen when he graduated in 1888. While at school he was fascinated by and read many English novels, and he studied politics and wrote on the state. He joined the Ministry of Education as an elite civil servant responsible for the modernization of Japan. He began his career as administrative official specializing in cultural

affairs, most notably works of art. His mission was to build a modern system of art and culture in Japan. He quickly shifted from music to the study of what we nowadays call "cultural heritage," exploring old shrines and temples with an American teacher, Ernest F. Fenollosa. On the basis of their findings, he devoted himself to establishing a kind of national academy of Japanese art.

In 1889, Okakura's effort to establish Tokyo Bijutsu Gakko, or the School of Fine Arts, in Tokyo came to fruition, and the following year he became its director. Over the next eight years, he was engaged in modernizing the aesthetic traditions of Japan, or conversely in re-constructing the aesthetic traditions under a political system of the nation-state, by gathering great artists of Japanese-style painting from various schools, including Yokoyama Taikan, Shimoyama Kanzan, Hashimoto Gaho, and Hishiyama Shunso. As chance would have it, however, in 1898 he was suddenly removed from his position as director of the school that he himself had brought to existence, on account of a scandalous affair of a truly private nature. Just like any turning point in history, this was an event to which one in retrospect ascribes a decisive meaning—a moment in the history of a community, although it was apparently a chapter in someone's life.

The details of the affair matter little here (though one should mention in a parentheses that its cause was not a political power struggle but a scandalous love affair). What matters most to us is that Okakura and his company consequently formed Nihon Bijutsuin, or the Academy of Fine Arts in Japan. The Academy was a private, or pseudo-public but non-national, institution, running in parallel to the state-sponsored School of Fine Arts in Tokyo. It began to hold exhibitions in various parts of Japan to sustain itself financially.

The dismissal also led him to go abroad. Fluent in English from his youth, he had gone on a nine-month tour of study in America and European countries from 1886 through 1887. In 1893 he had also travelled to China to see historical places. But those official tours had been profoundly different from the one that he now made following his failure to

pursue a bureaucratic career. In the depths of despair he left for India. This was indeed an escape from the disappointing realities of Japan. But it was also a trip to discover the roots of Asian cultures. He stayed in India for about eight months from 1901 to October 1902. There he came to know many Indians and Europeans, including the poet Tagore. He, as it were, internationalized himself in India. It was there that he completed his first essay in English, *The Ideals of the East* (published in Britain in 1903).

"Asia is one" is the phrase with which Okakura began the book. It quickly became a celebrated slogan for the imperialistic wars of Japan; by providing a philosophical basis for the wars, it became widely used. As opposed to the Western colonialisation of Asian countries, it claimed the uniqueness and unity of Oriental culture, the essence of which, according to Okakura, was to be found in Japanese culture. The way he expressed this ultimate schema was fiercely aggressive.

More specifically, his schema saw Japanese art (Japanese aesthetics) as a practical synthesis of Indian religion (Buddhism) and Chinese ethics (Confucianism and Taoism). It was yet another Orientalism, vis-à-vis the Orientalism as seen from the Occident—an Orientalism born in the Orient that reflected the mirror image of the Occidental Orientalism. (Note that this Oriental Orientalism is not Occidentalism. The asymmetry cannot be eliminated, as modernization cannot be dissociated from Westernization in Japan. This historical situation has remained decisively the same to this day.) Okakura's *The Ideals of the East* undoubtedly inaugurated such an Oriental Orientalism or "Japonism," should that ever exist.

Having said that, I must here emphasize the fact that Okakura directly communicated to Western people in English and that he talked to the Asian brothers directly in English. He thought in English. He discussed Asia and Japan in the English language, the vehicle of Western culture. His translation was the reversal of what other Japanese intellectuals sought to achieve by transposing Western vocabulary, concepts, and ultimately culture to the Japanese equivalents, often fabricating neologisms.

I should also stress the fact that Okakura based his theses on his first-hand observations of and experience in Japan, China and India. (I suspect that although many have followed in Okakura's footsteps in emphasizing that Oriental culture is equal to or even superior to the Occidental, only Suzuki Daisetsu can be said to match Okakura in terms of his command of English and empiricism.)

Here I can perhaps talk about the peculiar "body" of Okakura Tenshin. His body is chimerical, idiosyncratic, split and complex. What I mean is that while he had been educated in English since his childhood, which must have been rare in those days, he studied Chinese poetry and painting (*bunjin-ga*) in his adolescence. On top of this he extensively read European literature in the original languages (he is said to have greatly admired Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables*). He also studied traditional Japanese arts with foreign teachers. Furthermore, he became a governmental bureaucrat, discussing the state, and travelled extensively in various parts of the world, from Western countries to China and India for a sustained period of time. In a word, he "embodied" a (re-)discovery of "Japan" or "Asia" through and from the "outside."

None of Okakura's works is so conceptual as those of later philosophers. If philosophy must include a universal system of a certain concept, Okakura's peculiar works are not philosophical at all. His peculiarity, unlike any other, lies in the fact that he lived a thorough life in epic proportions with the schizophrenic body that modernization imposed on him.

In fact, we can see an example of such symptoms in his peculiar costumes. The uniform that he chose for the School of Fine Arts was modelled after a courtly costume of the eighth century. With its decorative hat, it was so peculiar that it made some members of the faculty hesitate to walk in the street. When he came back from India, he gave quite a shock to many with his "grotesque" outfit, "an Indian-style cloak in pale grey Indian cotton with a cover-up in similar style, to finish with an India turban on the head" (Saito Ryuzo). A year after he returned from India he became curator of the Oriental Department of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. He would spend six months in Boston every year

until his death in 1913. At any rate, in Boston too he wore a bizarre costume, something between a kimono and a Chinese Tao-dress, which he designed for himself. (I will show you a few photos of Okakura. The last one merits special comment; he is fishing at Goura on the Pacific coast in Japan. This photo was taken in Japan, but it has the ambience of nowhere, neither purely Japanese nor European ; this peculiarity is emblematic of his being, I think [fig.1–5].)

fig.1. Tenshin in the Tokyo Fine Arts School Principal's costume.

[images omitted]

fig.2. Tenshin in the courtyard of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

fig.3. A snapshot taken during Tenshin's stay in America.

fig.4. Tenshin in Beijin.

fig.5. Tenshin fishing in Goura.

Okakura began to call himself "Tenshin," his nom de plume, which posthumously became famous and established, around 1898 when he was dismissed from office on account of the scandal. The nom de plume has the following story : "I was getting fatter, so I tried many times to cut off the fat that had accumulated around my breasts. This had no effect. But a string of scars on my chest seemed to form the cursive Chinese character *ten* or 'heaven'. I was amused by this *ten* near my heart, so I began calling myself 'Tenshin' (heaven at heart) for fun." (ibid.)

Tenshin is thus the name of the trace of a body that received and lived through the shock of modernisation. Nothing is farther from the truth of his existence than simply calling him a Japanese nationalist. On the contrary, he incorporated cultural characteristics of the West, China, India, and Japan. He awkwardly patched them together to create almost grotesque "costumes." He surrendered himself to the fate of creating his body with those costumes, which are grotesque and bizarre to both Asian and European eyes. This grotesque body that modernization forced upon him is precisely his "thought."

In 1904 Tenshin published another book in English, *The Awakening of Japan*. This was published in New York. Victory in the Russo-Japanese War made Japan a world power. Tenshin accordingly maintained that Japan was modernised not by "external forces" but by her own spontaneous "awakening." He asserted that Oriental spiritual culture must be activated in pursuit of "peace." The book concludes with the following statement: "The Oriental dawn that folded us under its skin came, but I saw the world still in the darkness of humanity. Europe taught us to fight. When will they then learn the fruit of peace?" Tenshin thus strongly emphasized the peacefulness of Asian culture against "the militant image of Japan."

Two year later, in 1906, his third English book, *The Book of Tea*, was published in New York. It was soon translated into German and French, and was partly adopted as a junior high school textbook. It was probably one of the first books written by a Japanese person to acquire an international readership. Japonism had of course been spread widely

through several World Expositions. That is why the Boston Museum of Fine Arts acquired a huge collection of Japanese art. Nevertheless, the book was the first to directly communicate Japanese culture to a Western audience and presumably had the greatest impact. It was only some twenty years later, in 1929, that it was translated into Japanese for the home readers. It may have determined the archetypal image of Japanese culture in the world before the Japanese themselves realised it. As a matter of fact, I truly wonder, as a Japanese intellectual who lives in the 21st century and who attempts to discuss Japanese culture abroad, if my statements can ever surpass this tiny book. This is my confession.

The Book of Tea is certainly a continuation of the preceding two books. It is based on the same theoretical schema that regards the Japanese art of *cha* ("tea") as a synthesis of Buddhism (India) and Taoism (China). The aesthetics of Teaism, in other words, incorporate both philosophy and ethics to make a "peaceful culture" viable internationally. This doctrine considers Tea not only as a tradition of Japanese culture but as a "place" where the "East" meets the "West" and which can be shared by both.

> Strangely enough humanity has so far met in the tea-cup. It is the only Asiatic ceremonial which commands universal esteem. The white man has scoffed at our religion and our morals, but has accepted the brown beverage without hesitation.

"The brown beverage" is open to universality beyond "religion" and "morals"—universality where the East and the West meet each other. This is probably where Tenshin found relief in "tea." He, however, made a small concession in the phrase just quoted: the "tea-cup." Whoever practices tea ceremony in Japan would say the *wan* or bowl rather than the teacup in this context. Tenshin, however, titled Chapter I from which I have quoted "The Cup of Humanity." By translating *chawan* as "tea-cup," he attempted to open Teaism to humanity. At this stage, unfortunately, the Japanese language cannot catch up with this universal expansion. As late as 1980 "humanity" was still translated as *ninjo* (human nature or kindness) (by Oketani Hideaki). In the same chap-

ter Tenshin also mentions:

> The outsider may indeed wonder at this seeming much ado about nothing. What a tempest in a tea-cup! he will say. But when we consider how small after all the cup of human enjoyment is, how soon overflowed with tears, how easily drained to the dregs in our quenchless thirst for infinity, we shall not blame ourselves for making so much of the tea-cup.

The cup is here used as the vessel holding "human enjoyment" and "tears" or satisfying a "quenchless thirst for infinity" (incidentally, this last, "infinity," does not belong to the basic vocabulary of Japanese culture; it is a term of Western philosophy). By writing directly in English, he transposed the traditional *chawan* of the tea ceremony into a universal cup of humanity, into a vessel holding a beverage that slakes the thirst for "infinity." Here I can perhaps say something about the "Other Cup" in the manner of Jacques Derrida's *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe* (*L'autre cap*). If Europe holds out a *cap(e)*, Asia will, according to Tenshin, hold out a tiny *cup* to the world.

That meant for Tenshin above all holding out the Art of Life. He says: "It (Teaisme) 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 English word "life" is yet another term that has a kind of prismatic effect on us, as it has far too many equivalents in Japanese. This much can be said, however: Tenshin regards "life" as something extremely difficult and finds it inevitably "imperfect." In spite of, or rather because of, its imperfection, Teaism can inversely be said to become "the Art of Life" that can "accomplish" the imperfect. Comparing the Art of Life to the world-famous Code of the Samurai, Tenshin underscores the peacefulness of the culture that has nurtured Teaism.

In despair of the war-torn earth, Tenshin mentions:

> Meanwhile, let us have a sip of tea. The afternoon glow is brightening the bamboos, the fountains are bubbling with delight, the soughing of the pines is heard in our kettle. Let us dream of evanescence, and linger in the beautiful foolishness of things.

Cha enacts the place of "vacuum" underlying Taoistic and Zen teachings in a real-life space, where only the minimal necessities of natural and human life are arranged. With such bare essentials the host entertains his guest to stage the ultimate space and time in which the two reach out to each other. *Cha* in this way preserves life's impossibility, imperfection, transience, and absurdity intact in order to finalise them as "beauty"—this is the Oriental Ideal that Tenshin sought in Teaism.

Tenshin thus evidently sings a song of praise for the Art of Life, in contrast to the Art of Death. But his tone increasingly becomes pessimistic in the latter half of the text, as if real life is inevitably attracted by and rushes toward death. The original schema exalting Oriental culture against the Occidental gives way to a different tone. A secondary theme in a minor key gradually comes to the surface in place of the aggressively powerful major theme. This modulation becomes manifest after the particulars of the tea ceremony are explained in Chapters 2 (The Schools of Tea), 3 (Taoism and Zennism) and 4 (The Tea-Room). Already in Chapter 5, titled "Art Appreciation," Tenshin expresses his discontent in and criticises the realities of contemporary culture and art. He concludes the chapter with the following lament: "We are destroying art in destroying the beautiful in life." In the following chapter, "Flowers," he laments the doom of gentle flowers, whose beauty makes them sacrifices to humans:

> Tell me, gentle flowers, teardrops of the stars, standing in the garden, nodding your heads to the bees as they sing of the dews and sunbeams, are you aware of the fearful doom that awaits you? Dream on, sway and frolic while you may in the gentle breezes of summer. Tomorrow a ruthless hand will close around your throats.

What personification! What empathy toward flowers! It is true that the traditional culture of Japan has found profound truth in "flowers" and has never ceased to praise them in poetry and songs. (I was in fact

planning to suggest that the words "the flowers," "the wind" and "the moon" as such summarise certain philosophical interpretations of the world.) But I must admit that Tenshin's lamentations over flowers are far from the attitude of the Japanese. Rather they strongly evoke a certain Romanticism as formulated in the West. By dramatically identifying himself with the flowers sacrificed to the beautiful and to art, Tenshin inadvertently associates the art of life with death. It is this reversal, this inversion, that conceals the secrets of *The Book of Tea* in a way too obvious.

"Let us," says he, "not be too sentimental." And yet he immediately quotes Kukai, a mystic Buddhist monk from the beginning of the ninth century, as follows : "Flow, flow, flow, flow, the current of life is ever onward. Die, die, die, die, death comes to all." Having thus translated Kukai, he makes the following remark:

> Destruction faces us wherever we turn. Destruction below and above, destruction behind and before. Change is the only Eternal, —why not as welcome Death as Life? They are but counterparts one of the other, —the Night and Day of Brahma. Through the disintegration of the old, re-creation becomes possible.

At the end of the chapter he finally makes "flowers"—which in this case must be cherry blossoms in Yoshino or Arashiyama in Kyoto "surrendering themselves to the wind," since they stand for the archetype of everlasting beauty in Japan—utter the word as if using ventriloquism. No Japanese could have imagined this, i.e., "Farewell, O Spring! We are on to Eternity."

The falling cherry blossoms have been closely intertwined with the concept of death in the traditional culture of Japan as the 12th-century poet and monk Saigyo, of whom every Japanese must be cognizant, most intensively expressed in the following verse: "I wish to die under a cherry tree in full bloom/in the second month of the year/at full moon." Death as sung by Saigyo indicates the transience of things in which every living creature must of necessity perish. This is one of the fundamental Buddhist thesis as re-interpreted by Japanese culture. The flowers can

represent the beautiful only because they are ephemeral—only because they preclude "eternity." They strongly resist eternity's attempt to reclaim their beauty; that is why Tenshin poignantly modified the traditional proposition on beauty as "Change is the only Eternal."

If the flowers represent the body of traditional Japanese sensibility and beauty, firmly resisting reclamation by any abstract and transcendental concept, Tenshin grafts "eternity," i.e., the Western and hence external concept, onto the traditional body, in a manner of "prothèse," that is, a substitute thesis. He makes the flowers a grotesque—or rather "protesque," if I may say so—chimerical body heading towards death.

The Philosophy of Eternity (let's face it!) underpinned by a certain sense of martyrdom is carried forward to the final chapter, "Tea Masters," which follows the Chapter of Flowers. It is elaborated and amplified to reach the fortissimo! Tenshin plays the coda with a frenetic pitch. Now listen :

> Those of us who know not the secret of properly regulating our own existence on this tumultuous sea of foolish troubles which we call life are constantly in a state of misery while vainly trying to appear happy and contended. We stagger in the attempt to keep our moral equilibrium, and see forerunners of the tempest in every cloud that floats on the horizon. Yet there is joy and beauty in the roll of the billows as they sweep outward toward eternity. Why not enter into their spirit, or like Liehtse, ride upon the hurricane itself?

It is clear by now that *The Book of Tea* did not simply introduce the art of the tea ceremony to a world audience. "Life" seems to Tenshin "foolish troubles" in the polysemic meaning of the word. "This tumultuous sea of foolish troubles," that is, "the hurricane," however, leads our existence to "eternity". Here what used to be the art of life is finalised as "dying beautifully." Tenshin declares that "He only who has lived with the beautiful can die beautifully" and concludes the book by relating the tragic death of Rikyu, who inaugurated the ceremony of tea.

Tenshin has described how Taiko Hideyoshi, the then ruler, became friendly with Rikyu through the tea ceremony and how Hideyoshi sentenced the latter to "harakiri." He proceeds to relate the "Last Tea of Rikyu":

> In the tokonoma hangs a kakemono, —a wonderful writing by an ancient monk dealing with the evanescence of all earthy things. The singing kettle, as it boils over the brazier, sounds like some cicada pouring forth his woes to departing summer. Soon the host enters the room. Each in turn is served with tea, and each in turn silently drains his "cup," the host last of all. According to established etiquette, the chief guest now asks permission to examine the tea-equipage. Rikiu places the various articles before them, with the kakemono. After all have expressed admiration of their beauty, Rikiu presents one of them to each of the assembled company as a souvenir. The "bowl" alone he keeps. "Never again shall this 'cup,' polluted by the lips of misfortune, be used by man." He speaks, and breaks the "vessel" into fragments.

The cup—indeed, only the cup—is broken into pieces. The Cup of Humanity with which *The Book of Tea* has begun is broken at the moment of death, which supreme power has forced upon the tea master. This implies that beauty is bound to perish in history. Beauty as the art of life cannot resist the destructive forces of "history" and "power," broken like waves and blown like flowers.

Here too, however, the word "eternity" relieves Tenshin of "death." Immediately before Rikyu stabbed himself in the stomach with a dagger, he composed the farewell song, after the Zen tradition, with which Tenshin ends his book. He however did not cite the first two lines of the song, which read: "a life of seventy years" and "*riki kitotsu*," or "I make an ultimate cri de cœur body and soul." A piercing shriek rent the air, splitting heaven from earth, running right through the border between life and death. It was an ultimate shriek beyond any human meaning.

As I said, Tenshin did not quote the untranslatable shriek and translated the "precious sword" that immediately follows it as "Sword of Eternity." And he further translated Rikyu's following line: "I shall now fling myself into heaven" as "Thou hast cleft thy way," meaning that the sword cleaves its way onto eternity. And he said, "With a smile upon his face Rikyu passed forth into the unknown." This is the final sentence of the text. Rikyu as envisioned by Tenshin moves towards eternity with a smile upon his face.

The defeat of "beauty" is compensated by "eternity"—this must be the most philosophically important thesis in *The Book of Tea* if one is permitted to speak its philosophy. It finds no place in Japanese or Asian aesthetic traditions. Here again Tenshin has grafted one of the most romantic concepts of the West onto Japanese or Asian "beauty." The violent moment of Rikyu's death is thereby transformed into a quiet "smile."

The Book of Tea is a manifesto in which the East holds out a "cup of humanity" to the West. Yet it is also an attempt to save the broken cup —which anticipates and predicts the defeat of "life" and "beauty" in globalizing history—by "eternity"; Tenshin made, so it seems, a disparate effort to save the fragmented vessel by eternity, that is, an incorporeal and extremely abstract idea of Occidental origin. The book also talks about its author's historical body, a patchwork of corporeal fragments from the cultures of the West, China, India, and Japan.

A peculiar cup of Tenshin has already been made of fragmented cultures of "humanity." It has vacuum at its centre, of which he has written in connection with the radical structure of the tea room or with Taoism and Buddhism. His "cup" is the container of vacuum. But it is also the container of tears, as he has unwittingly implied everywhere in the text. "A cup of tea" is also "a cup of tears."

Tenshin anticipated that a cup of himself, made of different fragments, had the fate of being smashed to pieces just like Rikyu's "cup." In contradiction to this anticipation, he only wished to have the cup broken by the "Sword of Eternity" if it had to be broken.

In 1913, seven years after the publication of *The Book of Tea*, Tenshin died in Japan. Was “Rikyu’s smile” upon his face? I do not know.