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Myths at Work: Taming Imperial Histories with Tea

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes a day-long tea service at Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo to unpack how people can uncritically replicate myths that subdue recognition of imperialist aggression. Extending the work of Roland Barthes, it identifies how myths can operate through objects grouped as a set, deployed in space, and used in interaction. Meanings attributed to objects both in their singularity and as members of a collection – a dual layering of semiotic interactions – can collude to vivify a myth that, in this case, emphasizes the peaceful essence of Japanese culture and depoliticizes a history of imperial violence. In doing so, the myth rides on a translocal connection that links the nation and the former empire to Asia today. The analysis reveals the ways that the material arrangement and physical enactment of a tea performance at a particular point in time suppressed a violent history of Japanese imperialism fought under the banner "Asian universalism" and invoked in its place a narrative of spreading peace through a bowl of tea.

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Introduction

The tea ceremony is commonly seen as one of the purest expressions of "Japanese culture," a synthesis of its defining aesthetic activities and a condensation of a putatively national quintessence. Across the course of the twentieth century, practitioners, educators, and families of tea masters actively transformed it into a tool for nationalizing efforts, converting a practice that was once the domain of elites into a symbol of the nation. In the process, training in and mastery of the tea ceremony was recast as a way of making "good Japanese" and projecting the essence of the nation (Surak 2013).

Yet this history of nation-building in modernizing Japan is one also intertwined with a history of empire-building – and its subsequent suppression within national historiography. Post-war Japan saw its imperial expansion reworked into an exception to the rule of a long-standing and discretely contained nation (Oguma 1995), with 1945 transformed into a "zero hour" reset of the country in both the public imaginary and official narratives (Gluck 1997). These endeavors have been remarkably successful at consigning the empire to the historical margins (Conrad 2014; Igarashi 2000; Sang-Jung 1994) and redefining Japan as a natural outgrowth of a homogenous Japanese people (Oguma 1995). If

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consensus has not been complete – as seen, for example, in the long-standing contentious politics of Ryūkyūans – it still remains strong.

Notable within this post-imperial reframing was the redefinition of Japan as a "land of peace." Powerful figures within the government and elsewhere promoted this palatable self-characterization that became widely embraced across the political spectrum (Surak 2013, 104). Anti-nuclear protests, for example, have often relied on characterizations of the Japanese people as inherently peaceful and Japan as a victim of nuclear bombardment rather than an instigator of imperial aggression (Orr 2001). Indeed, one of the shared elements of post-imperial nation-building, whether on the right or on the left, has been a common erasure of the violence of Japan's imperial past (Conrad 2014).

However, the end of the Cold War reconfigured the East–West divide and opened space for readdressing imperial aggression. New movements brought attention to erased pasts, such as those of the so-called comfort women (*jūgun ianfu*従軍慰安婦) forced into sex work by the Japanese army (Yoshimi 1995), and public figures like Kang Sang-Jung fostered awareness of imperial atrocities. Yet this recovery of suppressed violence was not without backlash. The late 1990s and early 2000s saw a resurgence of neonationalist activities and groups, sparking heated public debate around issues like history coverage in textbooks and formal apologies for wartime brutalities (Nozaki 2008).

The historical moment of the early 2000s is a particularly favorable one for dissecting the reproduction of nationalist and imperialist myths. When the public salience of issues such as imperial aggression and historical revisionism is strong, it facilitates reflexive engagement by everyday people with complex topics that might otherwise remain repressed or recede into the background (see Brubaker 2006). As such, the early 2000s offer a propitious site for an ethnographic excavation that unpacks how people manipulate polysemous symbols and in the process reproduce the dominant myths used to dispel controversy around Japan's violent imperial past.

Tea at Yasukuni

To do this, the analysis dissects a day-long tea service performed at Yasukuni Shrine, a contentious site for remembering selected war dead, to reveal how the event's staging and assembly of utensils – both as individual objects and in their combination as a set – invoked a nested set of themes that tamed a divisive history of Japan's imperial aggression. The event took place in October 2006, a particularly charged moment in the contemporary history of Yasukuni Shrine when its links to Japanese imperialism sparked international controversy that defined news headlines and became a topic of public debate. The shrine is best known as the resting place of souls who died on behalf of the emperor and currently number around 2.5 million. Among their ranks include, since 1959, over 1,000 Class-B and Class-C war criminals, and since 1978 14 Class-A war criminals, Tōjō Hideki among them. Controversially too, the shrine also houses the souls of Korean and Taiwanese subjects of Japanese imperial rule who died on the Japanese side of the war, a memorialization rejected by many of their family members (Utsumi 2006).

As with many war cemeteries, the shrine is a potent site for energizing and transmitting particular, selective, and contested national and nationalizing narratives (Takahashi 2005; Takenaka 2015). In the postwar era, it has become a focal

point of redeeming the war dead and commemorating peace. Not only is Yasukuni a place for memorializing the souls sacrificed for the emperor and imperial projects but also a stage for commemorative events that memorialize Japan's imperial aggressions. Every year on August 15, the day of Japan's surrender to the Allied Forces, nationalists from the political center to the far right gather by the thousands at the shrine (Nelson 2003; Takenaka 2015). Their ranks include extremists dressed as kamikaze pilots and carrying banners emblazoned with maps of Japan that include its former colonies and phrases celebrating its imperial expansion. Most attendees, however, are conventionally attired members of the general public, as well as elites who offer prayers for the lives lost – notably, though, not of the colonized subjects or victims of war on the "other side."

In addition to these annual nationalist and ultra-nationalist expressions, the shrine is home to the country's oldest military museum. The Yūshūkan is known for presenting a contentious revisionist narrative of Japan's colonization of East and Southeast Asia, told as a story of brotherly aid and good will in the face of military and economic threat from the West (Breen 2007). The museum's narrative recasts Japanese imperial aggression as a defensive move carried out under the banner of "Asian Co-Prosperity." The privatization of the shrine after World War II shifted the way its management presents its purpose from that of war memorial to one commemorating peace (Takenaka 2015). Unsurprisingly, visits by ministers and prime ministers continue to provoke diplomatic rows with Japan's neighbors (see Selden 2008).

This was the case on 15 August 2006 when Prime Minister Koizumi Jun'ichirō paid his respects at the shrine. While leading the country, he made annual visits to Yasukuni, attracting media attention and diplomatic discord, but in 2006 he selected the most controversial date possible by visiting on the anniversary of Japan's defeat in World War II. China and South Korea reacted strongly, calling the visit indicative of Japan's unrepentant stance toward its imperial aggressions, and the incident and responses received wide coverage in the Japanese news. As the media gravitated to the story, public awareness and discussion of what was popularly framed as the "Yasukuni problem" ran high.

Two months after Koizumi's August 15 visit, Hōunsai, the retired grand master of the Urasenke School of tea, prepared a ritual tea offering for the souls of the war dead at Yasukuni, accompanied by supporting tea services (*seki* 席), held across the day.[1] Preparing tea at Yasukuni was potentially controversial given the heightened attention at the time, yet at the *seki* analyzed here, the violent imperial past was subdued by two carefully intertwined themes evoked through the selection of tea utensils and their deployment in space.

[1]Grand masters typically carry multiple names over the course of their lives. The fifteenth-generation Urasenke grand master was officially Sen Sōshitsu XV 千宗室 during his tenure as the head of the family, though he was commonly referred to as Hōunsai 鵬雲斎 or Hōunsai Oiemoto 鵬雲斎御家元. He retired from the position in 2002 and his first-born son became the official family head. In retirement, the former grand master took on the name Sen Genshitsu 千玄室 and came to be called "Hōunsai Daisōshō" 鵬雲斎大宗匠 by his adherents. For the sake of simplicity, I will refer to him here as Hōunsai.

Myths at work

To understand how myths "work," it is useful to turn to Roland Barthes's work on myths. In his canonical account, myths are semiotic systems within which a sign connects a signifier and signified and thereby draws on and produces meaning, or signification, within the social order (Barthes 1972, 110–126). Barthes illustrated how this operates by analyzing a cover of the magazine *Paris Match* that carried an image of a young Black man in a uniform saluting the French flag. As he describes, the background of French colonialism makes sense of the otherwise incongruous image. In this maneuver, the concept (the French Empire) drains the form (the saluting youth) of his own history or biography. His personal details are suppressed, though not entirely erased, as the French empire fills the image with a set of meanings that make immediate sense of the array. The background of French colonialism becomes a mere statement of fact as it transforms history into nature, and in the process deleties, erases, and nullifes.

As such, myths for Barthes are "depoliticized speech" that make the connections they forge appear "innocent" or "natural and eternal" and impose an economical clarity that dispenses with the complexity (Barthes 1972, 169–70). For anti-colonial thinkers such as Aimé Césaire (2000) and Gayatri Spivak (1988), such putative depoliticization remains highly political, riding fundamentally on violence. As Frantz Fanon describes of colonialism, "... it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it" (Fanon 2005, 210), a vicious erasure that can generate cognitive dissonance and deep alienation (see, for example, Kincaid 1991). Yet within the dynamics of suppression and repression resides a possibility for "multidirectional" (Rothberg 2009) or "contrapuntal" (Said 1993) readings and retellings that challenge hegemonic forms.

Still, myths can be tenacious and when invoked and enacted in embodied form, they are particularly resilient. Corporeal expressions can insure against cumulative questioning because they are incorporated directly, rather than mediated through language, and thereby elide the easy possibility that language provides for discursive challenge (Connerton 1989, 102; Surak 2013, 11–28). They are also, in a Butlerian sense, performative (see Butler 1990). That is, their enactment simultaneously obscures their constructed origins, making the myths – or "discourses" in an alternative terminology – appear to be natural or essential. If the possibility of disrupting or subverting them is ever present, people more often uncritically replicate them, continuously constituting and reconstituting the structures of meaning (Butler 1990). As such, people may inadvertently engage and reinforce particular myths, even as they are doing other things.

In his original statement, Barthes concentrated on myths in their most pared down form: a juxtaposition within a single image. This raises interesting questions about possibilities for extension. How might objects as a collection and employed in interaction invoke myths to de-politicize controversial imperial pasts? The present analysis identifies how myths can operate at a second level, through objects grouped as a set, deployed in space, and used in interaction. Meanings attributed to objects both in their singularity and as members of a collection – a dual layering of semiotic interactions – can collude to vivify a myth that, in this case, emphasizes the peaceful essence of Japanese culture and depoliticizes a potentially controversial history of imperial aggression. In so doing, the myth analyzed here rides on a translocal connection that links the nation and the former empire to Asia today.

Methods

The analysis is a historically situated ethnography that draws on a wider body of fieldwork on the tea ceremony that I carried out from 2002 to 2012. The bulk of the research took place in Tokyo, Kyoto, and Awaji Island, representing the country's current metropolitan capital, an historic cultural capital, and its rural hinterlands. I also carried out shorter fieldwork trips in several other regions, including Tōhoku, Chūbu, and the wider Kansai area. The research included participant observation of weekly classes at four locations for at least one year, frequent visits to tea classes at six sites, and one-shot visits at 14 additional sites. I also participated in public tea performances at schools, hotels, museums, community centers, shrines, temples, and local festivals, along with events hosted by various associations of practitioners. In addition, I observed as an attendee eight separate *kencha* (献茶) events, or large-scale tea services at shrines performed in recognition of the dead, performed in the Tokyo, Kyoto, and Nara regions. I also undertook over a decade of rigorous tea training, eventually acquiring a "tea name" (茶名) and license to teach.

Outside Japan, I carried out extended participant observation of the tea world on the west coast of the United States, along with shorter fieldtrips to Japanese tea centers in South Korea and China. In Japan, I conducted semi-structured interviews with over 100 tea practitioners, and outside Japan I did the same with over 50 practitioners. In addition, I carried out archival research at the Chadō Research Center, the National Diet Library, the National Institute for Educational Policy Research, and Tokyo Women's Christian University Library. At the Chadō Research Center, I examined the entire run of the monthly magazines published by Urasenke since 1908, first entitled *Kon'nichian Geppō* (今日庵月報) and later renamed *Chadō Geppō* (茶道月報). This broad base of fieldwork informs the presentation of the tea world offered here, as well as the interpretation of the tea event at the center of the analysis.

Tea performances

Around 2 million people in Japan consider themselves tea practitioners and about 90% are women. About 70% of tea practitioners are members of the Urasenke School of tea preparation and about 20% of the Omotesenke School, with the remainder belonging to one of a several dozen smaller schools (Surak 2013, 6). Adherents typically participate in weekly lessons where they learn hundreds of ways of preparing tea in a strictly regulated and highly ritualistic manner, and it is lessons that dominate their lives as tea practitioners. Full formal tea ceremonies (*chaji* 茶事) are three-hour affairs involving a small set of guests and includes a multi-course meal and a great deal of expense. As such, they are relatively rare, and most practitioners will attend a formal tea ceremony only once or twice a year.

Mass public tea demonstrations provide another avenue for extra-curricular tea practice. Some are held in conjunction with national Culture Day activities, others can be found at community festivals, museum celebrations, or memorial events. Temples in Kyoto, such as Kōdaiji, host large public gatherings aimed at a practitioner and tourist audience, alongside ritual tea offerings. The main tea schools host their own large-scale events, often focused on the use and display of rare utensils. The largest demonstrations

attract several hundred guests who spend the day visiting several tea performances held in close proximity. At each, the guests are divided into groups that watch a ritual tea preparation, enjoy a sweet and a bowl of tea, and admire the host's selection of bowls, scoops, scrolls, and containers intended to evoke a unique theme for the performance.

For tea aficionados joining as guests, the key draw is typically the combination of utensils chosen for the day (*toriawase* 取り合わせ), which is the primary means for aesthetic expression in the tea ceremony. The utensils – whose value is determined by an array of principles including their age, maker, origin, pedigree of owners, design, name, and official endorsement – can cost upwards of $10,000 each, sometimes much higher, and the use of antiques several hundred years old is not unusual (Surak 2017a). Historically, Chinese-origin objects were employed in formal tea preparation, and a sizeable export-oriented ceramics industry developed that catered to Japanese tastes (Guth 2011). From the sixteenth century these were complemented with items of local origin or from Korea or Southeast Asia, and even, on occasion, everyday objects of pleasing shape or special significance. A well-water bucket, for example, might be brought into the tea room during the summer to suggest coolness. As a handful of *iemoto* institutionalized the practice over time, they codified ritual preparation procedures, endorsed individual utensils as particularly suited to tea, and formalized canons of utensils deemed appropriate for the practice (Pitelka 2005, 89–96; Surak 2011; Hirota 2012). A well-water bucket used in a tea room today is more likely to be made by a famous artisan and endorsed by a grand master than simply retrieved from outdoors.

Found objects may still be employed in tea settings, as will be seen below, but they are rare: a degree of status and expertise is needed to deviate from canonical forms in an accepted manner. Frequently, it is men or foreigners – groups accorded higher status within the tea world than the broad base of Japanese women – who risk such moves, though sometimes women venture out. An object's appropriateness for the tea room is judged according to the aesthetic standards of size, weight, balance, overall feel, and design used to evaluate canonical utensils, which eliminates much variation. Those deemed acceptable are typically transformed from mundane objects into esteemed tea utensils through their handling and storage inside and outside the tearoom. Most crucial is the commissioning of a made-to-measure wooden box – a key conveyer of value – to house the utensil following standards set within the tea world (Surak 2017b, 177–180).

Though the rarity or expense of individual objects may draw interest, each utensil is also selected with an eye towards a harmonious arrangement with other implements that, as a whole, evoke a theme. During the spring, for example, a tea scoop carved from cherry tree wood might be paired with a tea container with a schematic design of hills in gold leaf that recalls Yoshino, an area made famous in a tenth-century poem in which the author sees its blooming cheery trees as resembling snow. These might be used to prepare tea underneath a scroll reading "one flower opens" which an experienced practitioner would know is the first part of the Zen phrase that ends "under heaven is spring," referring to the cherry blossom season. The polyvalence of utensils is valuable, and their cost can increase with the range of possible meanings that may be attributed to them. In such cases, it is the context – namely their arrangement as a unique set for the occasion – that determines the interpretation. The hills on the tea container described above could, as part of a different combination, suggest the distant mountains that appear during the winter, or the cherry-wood tea scoop might bear the name "daybreak"

and recall New Year's Day or the opening lines of literary classic *The Pillow Book*. Thus, the utensils in a tea room are seen twice: both in their singularity as a notable object and as part of a constellation that evokes a theme *sui generis*. As such, the *toriawase* combination contributes an additional layer of meaning and value to each piece – one, of course, reliant on the background knowledge of the guests for deciphering it.

Grand masters and Kencha

Anchoring the tea world are grand masters, or *iemoto* (家元), who head the families that define the different "schools" of tea. Over time, they have successfully monopolized authority over utensil styles, aesthetic taste, and formalized tea preparation procedures (*temae* 点前), grounded in their connections – familial or otherwise – to Sen Rikyū (Pitelka 2005, 89–96; Surak 2011). For the *iemoto*, the Meiji Restoration brought particular challenges as it undid the social hierarchies and related patronage systems that undergirded their position. As they maneuvered to maintain relevance, they innovated new forms of and roles for tea practice (Hirota 2012). Ritual tea preparation at Shinto shrines, known as *kencha*, is one of these.

Kencha dates to December 1878 when the head of the Yabunouchi School prepared tea in a ceremonial performance at Kitano Shrine in Kyoto, a location associated with a massive tea event hosted by the warlord Toyotomi Hideyoshi in 1587 that aimed to consolidate the new leader's cultural and social legitimacy. The *kencha* innovation gained traction the following year (1879) when the grand master of the Omotesenke School took up the baton in the same location. [2] Importantly, the *kencha* spectacle was public. It placed the grand master's tea performance – and a tea preparation of the most formal sort – on wide view for the first time.[3] The shift was significant as tea schools had long held that only the grand master could learn the most secret and formal tea preparations handed down from Sen Rikyū (Kumakura 1980, 165–7). The mythology of these secret teachings, directly incorporated into the grand master's body, anchored his own position as the inheritor of Rikyū and the pinnacle of a particular school.[4] By putting the grand master's tea performance on display, *kencha* played a vital role in the solidification *iemoto*-controlled tea.

In contemporary times, *kencha* performances have become a staple in the annual tea calendar and have expanded into massive affairs. No longer a single performance by an *iemoto*, they now take over large expanses of temple grounds, with tea served dozens of times over the course of a day. A typical *kencha* event will begin with a grand master performing tea in the main precinct of a shrine while wearing a mask over the mouth and using a formal array of utensils, most of which will be reserved solely for *kencha* ceremonies or newly created for the day. Priests and members of the shrine, along with the grand master's inner circle, form the core audience. Behind or alongside them come the invited tea practitioners, often one hundred or so, positioned as observers. After the grand master performs tea, several accompanying tea services, or *seki* (席), will be held across the

[2]Since then, seven Kyoto-based schools and branches of tea have continued this service on an annual basis in rotation, and many grand masters have expanded *kencha* performances beyond Kitano (see Kumakura 1980, 165–7).

[3]Such a display shares resonances with the transformation of the emperor from a hidden to spectacularly displayed power center (see Fujitani 1998).

[4]On the relationship between secret teachings and authority structures in traditional arts, see Rath (2006, 16–118) and Nishiyama (1959).

temple grounds. For a large gathering, over 600 guests can be expected to visit each *seki*, where tea is served in as many as a dozen ritual preparations over the course of the day. One such accompanying tea preparation at a *kencha* event in Yasukuni offers a lens into the mechanics of how a tea service works to defuse a controversial history of imperial aggression.

Kencha at Yasukuni

To explore how this operates, the following analyzes a *kencha* tea preparation at Yasukuni Shrine in 2006, two months following a controversial visit by the prime minister to the shrine that generated heated public and international debates about recognizing the atrocities of Japan's imperial expansion. Despite the bellicose associations of the shrine, the name *Yasukuni* (靖国) literally means "peaceful country," and over the past several decades, the shrine's management has promoted it as a place for commemorating peace (Takenaka 2015). It is this function that serves as grounds for an annual mass tea gathering where the head of the Urasenke School offers *kencha* for the enshrined souls. Around 600 tickets to the event are sold, allowing attendees not only the rare opportunity to see the grand master make tea but also to visit three additional tea preparations held on the temple grounds. Typically, the Urasenke organization approaches highly ranked tea teachers – those with many years of experience and great dedication of time and money to the tea school – to host the accompanying *seki*. It is a privilege that may be accepted with reluctance. Planning begins months in advance, around forty people must be mobilized to carry it off, and upwards of $50,000 might be spent on acquiring tea utensils for it. However, taking on the responsibility cements one's position within the upper ranks of the tea world and a request linked to a grand master is not easily refused.

These were the concerns that Mrs. Tanaka expressed to me when she was invited to hold a tea performance at Yasukuni Shrine as part of a *kencha* ritual. In her early 60s and a childless housewife, she occupied herself with teaching the tea ceremony and attending elite tea gatherings, a hobby sustained by her substantial family wealth. Years of patronizing a particularly well-positioned utensil dealer gave her access to an exclusive market of antiquities that only rarely appear in shop windows. Yet with a limited budget, she had to be careful with her selections, made in consultation with the dealer. He suggested a Goryeo Dynasty (918–1392) Korean vase in butter yellow to be used as a water container. Broken and repaired, it was appropriate for the withering weather of autumn. Its strikingly curved top earned it the name "eboshi" (烏帽子), or the hat of a Shinto priest, which Hōunsai had written on its box. She employed this rare piece as the anchor for making her other *toriawase* selections, with an eye to visual contrast and balance, symbolism, origins, and cost.

A week before the event, I went to Mrs. Tanaka's teahouse to help with the preparations since I would be assisting at the gathering. As we walked through the utensils that would be used, she explained the theme she had chosen for the event. On a tour of the grounds, she was struck by a poem hung in the main shrine, composed by the Emperor Meiji on his first visit to the shrine in 1874. Reading the archaic and somewhat enigmatic phrase, she offered her own interpretation.[5]

[5]The original is 我國の為をつくせる人々の名もむさし野にとむる玉かき and can be translated as follows: May the names of those who served our nation remain within the fenced premises (of this shrine) in the fields of the Tokyo area.

"The meaning is that we need to become a beautiful nation," she said, borrowing the title from the best-selling book at the time, *Toward a Beautiful Country*, written by the newly elected Prime Minister Abe Shinzō. She then elaborated on the short verse section-by-section. "The first part refers to people devoted to the nation," and she went on to explain that the term "musashino" (むさし野) captured the shift of the capital from Kyoto to Tokyo under the Emperor Meiji, and that the term "tamagaki" (玉かき) was an obscure word for the fence at a shrine of the sort that surrounds Yasukuni. Continuing, she clarified: "In 1874 the emperor went to the shrine and said that we need to build a beautiful nation – one that is both modern and strong – and that we need to get along with all the people of the world. That is the origin of Yasukuni. It was only afterward that the other meanings were added. Yes, we ended up at war, but I think it's important to go back to the origins .... The meaning of 'yasu-kuni' [*lit: peace* (靖)+ *country* (国)] is peace. It's about everyone in the world building peace together."

When I asked about the associations between the shrine and imperial aggression, Mrs. Tanaka admitted, "Yes, I've been worried about that," expressing concern that it might come up since it was a hot issue of debate at the time. However, she reverted to the more palatable version of history that would thematically guide her tea gathering: "Originally, though, Yasukuni was established around this poem, about uniting Japan though beauty and then developing good relations with the world and spreading peace. I want to go back to those roots."

At that point, Mrs. Tanaka's sister-in-law, who was helping with preparations, checked her own understanding. "So it means that we need to increase the number of people who are devoted to the country so that it will become beautiful?" Mrs. Tanaka swiftly elaborated, "Yes, but the point is that we need to do that no longer just in Kyoto but in the Tokyo area too." The addendum was not surprising. Kyoto often lurks in the background of tea practices across Japan and the unusual focus on Tokyo and the move of the emperor from Kyoto to the capital of Meiji Japan was not a typical choice for a tea practitioner and required some elaboration. Alongside the "Yasukuni equals peace" motif, she added a second theme, namely that tea originated in Asia and moved through Japan to spread peace throughout the world. This supporting theme took its provocation from the lifetime project of retired grand master Hōunsai, who would be preparing *kencha* for the enshrined souls at the event. During his four decades as the formal head of the Urasenke school, Hōunsai had done much to promote the tea ceremony overseas and he remained active in this capacity after retirement in 2002. Following Japan's defeat in World War II,[6] the then young heir-apparent to the Urasenke House, with a nod from his father, latched onto the trend promoted by the government to recast a newly demilitarized Japan as a peaceful "country of culture."[7] It was a savvy move since internal criticism against "feudal" remnants, like *iemoto* systems, was strong in the post-war years of

[6]Coming of age during the Pacific War, Hōunsai was drafted into the naval aviation corps in 1942 and subsequently moved to a "special attack squadron" (*tokubetsu kōgekitai* 特別攻撃隊), more colloquially known as a kamikaze squad. As he relays in numerous tea publications and interviews, he served tea to his comrades who were sent off to battle and eminent death and he recalled how his ancestor, Sen Rikyū, had done the same for Toyotomi Hideyoshi. With no mention of the reason for war itself, Hōunsai's standard telling remembers, instead, how the young soldiers thought often of their mothers and saw themselves as giving over their lives not for war but to end it. Often he links this difficult personal history to his project of spreading peace through tea. For a recent recounting, see https://www.asahi.com/dialog/articles/13627095.

[7]"Culture country Japan" (文化国日本) was the phrase that Prime Minister Katayama Tetsu (1947–1948) used to spearhead these efforts (see Surak 2013, 104). The Urasenke family also served tea to leaders in the US occupation army in the post-war years (see Kumakura 1980).

national re-evaluation, and this posed a threat to the *iemoto* authority structures undergirding the key tea schools (Surak 2013, 115–120).

In 1950, Hōunsai traveled to Hawai'i, home to a sizeable Japanese population that included some women who were already holding tea classes, and established an Urasenke branch there the following year. This first venture overseas soon turned into annual trips on what would become a regular circuit going through the mainland United States, Mexico, Italy, Brazil, and elsewhere, projecting Japan as a country of culture and tea as selfsame with peace.[8] These efforts he tied together under the often-repeated motto of spreading "peacefulness through a bowl of tea".[9] Over the next decades, he performed the ritual at major sites and events, such as the Berlin Wall in 1989, and for dignitaries, including the Pope and heads of state. From the 1980s, he made frequent trips to China to rebuild ties between the two countries and later founded an Urasenke training school in Tianjin. This joined the Urasenke branch associations he established in dozens of other countries, in addition to a tea school for foreigners built in Kyoto to train, effectively, tea missionaries. Driving numerous efforts to promote Japanese culture overseas, he was named Japan's Goodwill Ambassador to the United Nations in 2005.

In these endeavors, Hōunsai extolled the centuries-old phrase "harmony, respect, purity, and tranquility" (*wa kei sei jyaku* 和敬清寂), elevating it as a guiding principle. Declaring the ideals to be simultaneously Japanese and universal, he cast them as fundamental to the tea ceremony, yet accessible to any and all (see, for example, Sen 1979, 2006). In a set narrative continuously repeated in Urasenke materials and at its promotional events, tea originated in China, but was refined in Japan into a spiritual path that anyone may tread. As such, competence in the arcane behavioral rules or principles of connoisseurship that structure the practice is only secondary; anyone in the world who recognizes simply "harmony, respect, purity, and tranquility" while drinking a bowl of tea has grasped the essence of the practice, which is peace. These four basic principles, projected as universal, were used to ground the overseas expansion of the tea ceremony under the banner "peacefulness through a bowl of tea."[10]

Serving tea at Yasukuni

How did these nested themes work in action at Yasukuni? As is typical at tea gatherings, the interpretation of the *toriawase* began in the waiting area where guests gathered before entering the tea area as a group. Prominently displayed on one wall was a glass-encased calligraphic rendition of the Emperor Meiji's poem that Mrs. Tanaka had recited the prior week. Underneath it, she placed a list of the utensils – written in longhand calligraphy on a rectangular sheet of high-quality paper in accordance with a prescribed format – that would be employed in the tea preparation. Waiting guests would take turns admiring the poem and reading the list, noting any remarkable points such as a utensil's name, maker, prior owners, and endorsements by grand masters. Several utensils carried notes that they had received Hōunsai's stamp of approval, the *iemoto*'s authority attesting

[8]For an internal account of the overseas expansion faithful to the Urasenke project, see Mori (2005).
[9]In Japanese, the phrase was rendered "一椀からピースフルネス" (*ichi wan kara piisufurunesu*). Typically both the English and the Japanese variant appeared on banners and pamphlets in his promotional efforts.
[10]Hōunsai's book *Tea Life, Tea Mind* even bookends the main text with page-size characters for harmony, respect, purity, and tranquility in his own calligraphy. See Sen (1979).

to their value and appropriateness to the tea ceremony. Deciphering the connections among the utensils would begin here but remain incomplete until supplemented by their visual and tactile experience in the tea preparation proper.

In the actual tea performance, Mrs. Tanaka took the role typical of the host at a large gathering and offered explanations of the utensils while a helper prepared tea. This would occur twelve times for groups of about fifty people each over the course of the day. For every session, she diligently explained the utensils and themes in a format similar to the one she used with me the prior week. Even in the occasional modification, she still referred to the Emperor Meiji's poem and Hōunsai's project of spreading tea around the world.

During the service proper, the individual objects, their combination as a set, and their deployment within the room were mustered to express the double theme of Yasukuni as a place of peace and of tea spreading from Asia to bring peace across the world. For the first theme, utensils were selected with an eye to the poem that the Emperor Meiji composed on his first visit to Yasukuni. One of the main tea bowls, a red raku piece crafted by the twelfth-generation head of the Raku family, carried a schematic rendering of a gate – a *tamagaki* from the poem – that surrounds a shrine.[11] The tea container carried an image of a moon over suzuki grass, a combination that tea aficionados would know as *musashino*, an antiquated term for the Tokyo area employed in the poem. The cold water container, too, was named after a Shinto priest's hat. The tea scoop was given the moniker "sokkon" (即今) drawing emphasis to the "here and now" of the event at Yasukuni. Around these semantically rich objects were other utensils, including the kettle, the kettle lid holder, and the scroll, that carried simple autumnal references. These served as an appropriate but neutral background for the other objects – single items *in situ* – to express the Yasukuni theme.

The Yasukuni motif could have easily been a controversial one, and Mrs. Tanaka recognized this in her hesitance in explaining the *toriawase* to me. As described above, 2 months earlier Prime Minister Jun'ichirō Koizumi visited the shrine on the anniversary of Japan's surrender in World War II. The occasion provoked immediate condemnation from the South Korean and Chinese governments, which had already suspended summits with Japan in connection to the shrine visits, as well as street demonstrations by Tokyo residents demanding the end of such official visits.

The second, more abstract, theme about the diffusion of tea and accompanying peacefulness was expressed through the arrangement of objects in space. Aiding in this endeavor was the architecture of the room. The service took place not in a standard tea space of narrow measure, tatami mat floors, clay walls, paper doors, and low ceilings, but in a banquet hall with tiled floors, high ceilings, and large glass windows. In such a "Western room" (洋室) setting, tea is typically prepared on a low, purpose-built table by a person sitting on a stool, rather than kneeling on the floor. However, given the magnitude of the event, this West-inflected, more informal variant was avoided by the creation of an ersatz tea room within the modern chamber. Erected for the occasion, a small three-tatami mat space, missing two walls but containing an alcove, defined a formal, if makeshift, "traditional" space within the standard "modern" room. This

[11]On the links between Chinese and Korean potters and pottery and the Japanese tea ceremony, see Pitelka (2005).

enabled the tea to be prepared while kneeling on tatami mats for guests seated in rows of tables and chairs.

For use within the ersatz tea space, Mrs. Tanaka selected several implements from neighboring countries to convey the Asian origins of tea. In the alcove she positioned an antiquated vessel from Southeast Asia, likely Vietnam, to hold the day's flower arrangement. Underneath she displayed a small, lacquered container made in fourteenth-century China that was likely a medicine box in its prior life. The waste-water container, a utensil that often goes unnoted, was an antique Buddhist bowl from Southeast Asia. The showstopper, however, was the cold water container: the thirteenth-century Korean jug named "eboshi." Though each of the utensils as rare antiquities was remarkable in its singularity, they also worked together as a set. In this case, it was their common Asian origins, rather than their names or explicit motifs, that conveyed the theme.

Yet for this to work, the authoritative rigors of the tea world needed to domesticate the foreign objects. They could be exotic, but only within the dictates of aesthetic standards and canons of styles that grand masters had deemed appropriate to the tea ceremony. The butter-yellow Korean pot that anchored the entire set and dated back more than seven centuries was no longer a container for dry goods but of water – a task it took on reluctantly, threatening to crack if forced to do so for too long. In becoming a tea utensil, the details of the pot's individual biography were suppressed and instead the tea ceremony drew out its provenance and aesthetic form as the defining characteristics that made sense of the jar, giving it meaning and purpose in this context.[12] Similarly, too, the Chinese medicine container-turned-incense box was not of simply any genre, but lacquered in a style favored by tea masters in the Tokugawa Period. If these foreign-origin utensils had been individually incorporated into a tea display, their ancestry would have been only of passing note for similar found objects have long been adopted into tea practice. In a different setting, name or design might instead be highlighted. When, for example, Mrs. Tanaka used the same Korean pot a few months later for a short tea service for an antique dealer, she emphasized only its age and unique shape, rather than a distinctly "Asian" valence in her description of it. However, at the Yasukuni gathering, the combination of the utensils, presented as a set, invoked the theme of the Asian ancestry of tea *sui generis*. When placed together, it was the country of origin that became the point of note.

Even as the "Chineseness," "Koreanness," or "Southeast Asianness" of the utensils explained their presence, these foreign origins were simultaneously tamed by the tea room. As described above, only particular shapes and forms were selected, conforming to canonical tastes and melding with the setting. Even the terminology of their origins took on a particular tea style. Instead of using the standard country terms for "China" (*chūgoku* 中国), "Korea" (*kankoku* 韓国), or "Southeast Asia" (*tōnan ajia* 東南アジア) to refer to their biography, the host employed a more oblique set of descriptors commonly used in the tea ceremony – *karamono* (唐物), *korai*(高麗), and *nanban* (南蛮) – to declare their provenance both on the written list of utensils displayed in the waiting room and in her explanations to the audience. The Asian objects were there to make a point as a set, but in doing so, they had to submit to the dictates of the tea ceremony as well.

[12]The tea ceremony simultaneously promoted the pot beyond its origins as a mere dry goods container of little interest beyond its age; once it obtained the signed box that transformed it into a tea utensil, its market value would double.

As described above, the Asian artifacts employed were concentrated in the ersatz, Japanese-style tea preparation area. To convey the dissemination of the tea ceremony from Asia via Japan to the rest of the world, the host rallied the trays used to deliver sweets to the guests. In a small formal tea gathering, sweets are served as an accompaniment to tea and offered by the host before the ritual preparation begins. At large public performances, however, such individual attention from the host is impractical and instead helpers serve the sweets. In this case, kimono-clad assistants appeared from behind the tea space carrying the confections on trays of foreign origin in a choreography intended to convey the dissemination of tea from Asia and to an international arena.

During the performance, the guests of honor took their sweets from an antique porcelain bowl brought from China to the Tenryū Temple in Kyoto in the fifteenth century. As the bowl reached the main guests, Mrs. Tanaka would explain that Tenryū Temple carried out many missions to the Ming Court, bringing treasures from China to Japan.[13]

Following the lead of the antique Chinese dish was a cluster of much newer platters. These, too, would be drained of their individual histories and their presence explained with a narrative about Hōunsai's project of spreading "peacefulness through a bowl of tea." In this, the dishes' country of origin was important. Hailing from the United States, Mexico, and Italy, each represented a place where Hōunsai had established thriving tea ceremony associations decades before. Not only did the objects themselves mark this triumph, but their physical deployment did as well as the assistants carrying the "foreign" dishes fanned out around the room from the "Asian" tea space at its core. Unmentioned were the unusually humble origins of the trays. The makers were unknown, none had an elevated pedigree or endorsement from a grand master, and one had even been purchased in an airport souvenir shop. Instead, it was the country that gave them value in this setting. Most Urasenke tea practitioners would have been aware of each's connection to the retired *iemoto*'s project of internationalization. From 2001 onward there had been a wave of 50th anniversary celebrations of the overseas branches founded in the postwar years, and these celebrations were covered with great fanfare in the official tea periodicals. The galas hailed the success of Hōunsai's program to disseminate the practice across the world under the banner – often displayed in photographs alongside the articles – of "peacefulness through a bowl of tea."

Because the tea service accompanied a *kencha* performance, it was understood that the retired grand master would visit once he finished his own ritual tea preparation.[14] Members of his entourage arrived early to ensure that all the necessary preparations were in place to welcome the retired head of the Urasenke tea world in due fashion, and the tension around his entrance heightened as he failed to appear on time. Fitting with the emphasis on internationalization, I was asked, as the only non-Japanese person among the four assigned to make tea in rotation over the course of the day, to prepare tea for the retired grand master. I was also told by his entourage to truncate the preparation procedures. There would be no need for the retired *iemoto* to watch the full purification

[13]The historical note resuscitated an image of greater Asian exchanges, though one that obscured the rocky history of conflict between the two political orders that gave Tenryūji a near monopoly on trade.

[14]My ethnographic access was premised on helping at Mrs. Tanaka's tea service and therefore I was unable to observe the grand master's *kencha* performance on this occasion. However, I observed several other *kencha* rituals during my fieldwork.

ritual, for the point was not the tea, nor even the utensils, though they would be admired, but rather the figure of the grand master himself.

Finally, a buzz from the hallway signaled Hōunsai's arrival as he greeted and offered photo opportunities to the waiting guests, radiating warmth and pleasure. When he eventually entered the room, tea was served swiftly in shortened form and Mrs. Tanaka explained the utensil selection. However, the former grand master did not take the opportunity to ask further questions about the utensils as is common at formal gatherings. Instead, he responded to her explanation of the nested "peace" themes with a simple, "Yes, we need more of that." When I began purifying the utensil for their final display, he commented briefly, "Oh, you're setting them out," noting subtly that this move, standard in most tea procedures, should have been truncated according to the instructions of his entourage. More important was reserving time for photos with adherents, which were taken in abundance, before a member of his entourage swiftly ushered him out.

Myths and resonance

How were the nested themes of peace received by the guests? Did any question the choice, particularly at a time when the "Yasukuni problem" was a highly salient issue in the the news cycle, diplomatic dilemmas, and public debates? As others have showed, such times encourage everyday people to reflexively engage challenging topics that otherwise remain repressed (Brubaker 2006). The reactions of several attendees suggest that the messages found traction, carried by the underlying Barthian myth that Yasukuni is fundamentally a place of peace. Most people I spoke to recognized that the shrine had a controversial history, but then elaborated that this dark past stood second to the "true" peaceful foundations of the place. A typical reply came from a woman in her forties who explained to me, using phrasing that I would hear throughout the day, "Yasukuni was built for peace – you see that in the character *yasu* (靖). So many people gave up their lives so that we can now live in peace. The Class-A war criminals were added afterwards, which is something different. That's what puts the Chinese up in arms." She added that she felt for the people who were colonized but qualified her statement: "They don't see it the same. But individually I see it differently. It's all just very complicated, but I feel that we should respect those who enabled us to live in peace." An older woman in an opulent kimono explained to me, "You see, Yasukuni was originally built for peace. You see that in the name. '*Yasu*' means safety, security. The controversy is only a recent development." She went on to suggest that an age gap explains why some people do not agree. "Young people nowadays might think different if they're watching TV, but people of my generation know that it's about recognizing the importance of peace."

Other responses integrated both themes in defending the peace-based essence of Yasukuni. A woman in her thirties stared at me for a minute when I asked what she thought about the controversies around the shine. "I think it's strange. Yasukuni was built for peace." When I probed further about the protests, she replied, "Yasukuni is for the people who gave their lives for peace." She added, too, that it all resonated with the lifetime project of the former grand master, noting the second motif. "It's natural that 'peace' should be the theme of the tea performance. It's what [Hōunsai] has dedicated his life to as well." As a grey-haired practitioner told me straightforwardly, "Yasukuni is about

peace. That's why we are here today, to spread peace." She then continued, quoting Hōunsai's catchphrase, "It's about 'peacefulness through a bowl of tea'." For her, both themes made immediate sense. A complicated history of imperial aggression was simply irrelevant.

Only one person – a women in her thirties who had begun lessons only three months before – expressed difficulty at reconciling the complex past: "When you watch the news, you always see protests about Yasukuni and the history of the war, so I was surprised to find that the theme was 'peace.' It's a bit strange." Almost to check her response, she asked the woman beside her what she thought. Around the same age, but with a few more years of tea experience, she intervened, "For me it's not really strange. Yasukuni was originally built for peace. The other associations are really only recent." Caution is necessary when generalizing from a small sample, but those I spoke to who were steeped deeply in the tea world uncritically accepted the dominant narrative that repressed past atrocities. They forewent the opportunity to engage in a "multidirectional" interpretation (see Rothberg 2009) – which was on the table at that point in time of heated debate about the shrine and historical memory – as they uncritically reconstituted the hegemonic myth (see also Butler 1990).

Discussion

In honoring the past, commemorative places and events, particularly of the nation, reaffirm a selected self-identity, often recalling the personal sacrifice and heroism of "our side" (Mosse 1990). Public memorials selectively enliven and transmit shared remembrances, engineering collective memory (Aukema et al. 2022). Yasukuni, as it commemorates wartime sacrifice for the emperor in the name of peace, serves not only as a stage for but also an actor in obfuscating the fundamental violence of imperialism (Yoneyama 2016; Zwigenberg 2014). The tea ceremony performance analyzed here took place during a period of heightened public controversy that moved the "Yasukuni problem" from background to foreground in salience (see also Brubaker 2006). Alternative readings of the shrine's past were in the public awareness in the wake of diplomatic rows with China and South Korea, but instead the event's host chose to organize the event around the theme of "Yasukuni equals peace," vivifying the hegemonic myth at a moment when it might not be taken for granted.

Mrs. Tanaka did not invent the "Yasukuni equals peace" formula but engaged a readily available narrative: one ensconced by government efforts to resuscitate the country's image in the wake of imperial defeat by casting Japan – with Japanese culture as its most prominent expression – as merely a peaceful country.[15] It is also one that the management of Yasukuni has encouraged in reframing the shrine's identity as fundamentally a memorial to peace (Takenaka 2015). Urasenke, too, has historically played an energetic role in the myth's spread. Notably, when its *iemoto*-based system was put at risk in the anti-feudal atmosphere of the immediate post-war era, Hōunsai, then heir apparent, trumpeted peacefulness as the essence of the tea ceremony and Japanese culture as he

[15]In analyzing these mechanics, Akiko Hashimoto has characterized such moves as turning on the narrative that "national sacrifice is 'our bedrock for peace'" (Hashimoto 2015, 62).

proselytized abroad and expanded his practitioner base at home. The myth was a resource that Mrs. Tanaka could rely on as she organized her thematic selections and one that she could expect would resonate, an outcome substantiated by the feedback from the session. The myth also defused – or refused – confrontation with any tensions or contradictions embedded in the shrine's complex past, or even the paradox of how a shrine whose raison d'être is war is really about peace. These avoidances and erasures are part of the myth's successful operation, seen in the uncritical responses of the gathering's participants. The Barthian myth was called on and reinforced even as the participants aimed to achieve other things, such as projecting tea as fundamentally about peace or simply enjoying the sociability around it. Even if particular ideological projects are not the goal, they may still be activated by myths that lurk in the background as they facilitate meaning-making.

In carrying out its work, the myth spanned space and time through translocal connections that joined the nation and its imperial past to elsewhere in Asia today. Just as the myth of French imperialism emptied the youth on the *Paris Match* cover of his own biography, so too were the foreign utensils at the Yasukuni tea tamed as they were transformed into tea implements to evoke the day's themes. Housed in bespoke wooden boxes and given new Japanese names, pots from Korea, vessels from Southeast Asia, containers from China, and plates from the US, Mexico, and Italy were repurposed: the richness and complexity of the objects' individual histories were drained, leaving behind the elements deemed of value in the tea world. Once domesticated, the items could be rallied to convey the message of a shared Asian origin of tea and its diffusion from Japan to the rest of the globe. However, the broadly universalistic assertion of Asian commonality and spreading peacefulness across the world through tea was articulated in the particularistic Japanese terms of the tea ceremony – an articulation that also positioned Japan as the key pivot-point of this putatively universalistic expression.[16]

Presently, neonationalist claims and displays are less at the forefront of public debate and international diplomacy than in the early 2000s. Rather than disappearing, they have moved backstage. The continued influence of the Nippon Kaigi, a neo-nationalist group that aims to rewrite the Japanese constitution along the lines of its Meiji-era formulation, return the emperor to the center of political power, suppress "masochistic" views of history, and advance a nationalist version of Shinto, among other ultra-conservative goals, exemplifies the trend (Yoneyama 2016; see Surak 2020).[17] Even outside such efforts, a version of history that erases the violence of imperial aggression and presents Japan as fundamentally a country of culture and peace can still be perpetuated in more innocuous ways as people go about mundane activities such as making tea. As both Barthes and Butler observed, myths – or their close relative.discourses – remain powerful precisely because they facilitate meaning-making and communication in non-conscious ways.

[16]Naoki Sakai captures such a movement when discussing the compatibility of universalism and nationalism. Nationalist expressions constitute others as particular in order to establish "our" universalism, and it is through being grasped by our universalism that others gain identity through particularity. See Sakai (2005 156–157).

[17]The powerful organization, which includes more than half of Japan's parliamentarians in its membership of just 40,000, works mainly behind closed doors. It bolsters its power though its alignment with the Association of Shinto Shrines and has been successful in pushing through revisions to mainstream history textbooks that suppress coverage of the atrocities of the Japanese empire. Yet many Japanese people have little knowledge about what Tawara Yoshifumi has dubbed an "unknown gigantic organization" (see Tawara 2016).

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