

# *Teahouse Temporal Device: Tactility and Time in the Tai-an*

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This paper explores the Japanese teahouse, or *chashitsu*, as an Idea and an Object, a tool for transmission. The teahouse, as an archetype of an endogenously derived Japanese architecture and encapsulation of tea as a comprehensive art form, is exemplified by the Tai-an (ca.1852). This simplistic hermitage with its distinctive undersized doorway is the oldest surviving teahouse and is attributed to the master of tea ceremony Sen no Rikyū (1522-1591), progenitor of the ascetic *wabi-sabi* style. Following Rikyū's death by ritual suicide ordered by his feudal lord Hideyoshi Toyotomi (1537-1598), the rustic structure was installed at a much later date in its current location on the grounds of the Myoki-an temple in Yamazaki, Kyoto. In truth, its provenance remains disputed, yet this in no way diminishes the Tai-an's cultural importance as a National Treasure. Architecture as a cultural act and continuous process of renewal and rebuilding, as epitomised by the vicennial cycle of the Ise Shrine, philosophically underpins Japanese historical and cultural value as one that is not tied to material and form, but to time and occasion. To illustrate this point, my presentation is accompanied by the atmospheric photographs of Naoko Tamura (Takenaka Carpentry Tool Museum and Vutter Kohen 2019), who was commissioned to document repairs to the walls and re-shingling of the Myoki-an's teahouse and hall respectively by expert craftsmen – the first time in twenty-three years – due to superficial damage they sustained as a result of an earthquake in northern Osaka in 2018.<sup>1</sup>

In the case of tea practice or *chaji*, object value is placed on utensils passed down through generations for the memories they hold of their predecessors. The accumulation of practiced knowledge is likewise transmitted through the impermanent quality of teahouses. In contrast to the modern fixation on space, the bare and dark interiors of the Tai-an diminishes the physicality of space. Instead, carefully selected seasonal objects act as aesthetic prompts for guests to conjure an imagined landscape in the mind's eye. Considered together, tea ceremonies and teahouses define a culture of time oriented towards the duration of an event, termed by Wittmann (2017) as time-event. Neither exempt from change nor erasure, the siting of teahouses therefore need not be fixed, and intact preservation of the original is not necessary to guarantee authenticity. In some instances, new value emerges from discoveries arising from recreation.

The Tai-an, being “a light fragile ‘hermitage’ style hut, small in size, asymmetrical in plan, natural in material, yet precisely proportioned and finely detailed” (Walker 2002, p. 79), encapsulates all the qualities of a *sukiya* teahouse. It is widely believed that Sen no Rikyū's uncompromising utilisation of rustic materials is inspired by commoners' homes in the medieval period, from the log posts, lath windows, unadorned clay walls, to the thatched roof found in the Tai-an. The incorporation of reclaimed building elements for his prototypical teahouse sought to showcase eclectic materials in their natural and imperfect state. In extolling the noble beauty of wood, Frank Lloyd Wright (1928) singles out the Japanese for their deep knowledge of the material and its natural possibilities, acquired heuristically

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<sup>1</sup> As the Tai-an is closed to the public, the photographic project offers a privileged view into the spartan building, its textural finishes and ambience.

through carpentry and craft. Knots in the unprocessed wood, crude wall finishes, and the uneven weave in reed mats are calculated aesthetic decisions to accentuate the “thing-power” of materials elucidated by Bennett (2010). Such “refined poverty” enthused by Kakuzō Okakura in his seminal essay *The Book of Tea* (1906) belies a keen eye for organic asymmetry and costly commitment to quality implicit in the selection of building materials and fine workmanship. Here, I look at affect in its totality: the enchantment of objects that exceed their functions and symbolic meaning, the augmentation of their value by skilled labour in their fashioning, to their organic composition and transformation. The Tai-an’s form and constitutive elements are unique to itself. So too are the precious one-of-a-kind tea utensils, their inherent imperfections inspiring their inimitable irregular shapes (Hirota 1988).

Referencing the Tai-an, Kirisako (2023, p. 18) likens the Japanese teahouse to “a special world evoking *kami* and the Buddha. A course was set, to create a space expressive of a nature that transcended humankind and to seek in it a spiritual awareness of nature.” As an elevated practice with strict protocols on etiquette, the highly performative tea ceremony is itself a meditation on time. However, the structuration of time for the *chakai* (tea gathering) commences even before the *chaji* overseen by the host takes place. Along the garden path or *roji* leading to the teahouse, guests are made haptically aware of their movements through corporeal contact; Rikyū is known to have introduced the “sleeve-blushing pine” for the approach to the Tai-an (Hayashiya et. al. 1974). The dislocation of time as one traverses the layered *shōkō-ken* (inner garden) is pleasurable and gradual. By contrast, the transition into a liminal space removed from mechanical time and the flow of the everyday is achieved with certain effort squeezing through the *nijiriguchi* (crawl entrance), which is also the first time this type of ingress is known to be adopted for a teahouse. Of note is a recovered *amado* (wooden window shutter) ingeniously repurposed as its sliding door (Fujimori 2007). In that regard, time is already embedded into a building element predating the Tai-an’s existence. So too are the painted dark walls and all other surfaces and structural elements mellowed by the patina of age. Unfinished and exposed surfaces additionally mean they inevitably bear the marks of weathering and wear acutely. But for Rikyū, an object under the influence of time is proof that it has a spirit.

Covering a compact area of 3.68 sq.m., the Tai-an subscribes to the dimensions of an *ichijoshiho*-sized hermitage. With the minimum two-tatami-mat space shared by the host and a guest, intimate proximity between them are heightened by fluctuations in distal tension due to formal interactions over the prescribed duration of the tea ceremony. In line with his strict adherence to constraints, restricted illumination is introduced into the dim space of the Tai-an by Sen no Rikyū in an additive manner. Unlike the *kirei-sabi* teahouses introduced by his successor Kobori Enshū that sought a direct visual relationship with nature via the natural landscape or curated gardens (subsequently popularised in the *sukiya* style architecture), an affirmative and connective relationship with nature and the seasons is achieved through the senses inside the Tai-an. A faint waft of *sasa* fibres generously mixed into the earth walls creates an olfactory link to nature. Mindfulness means allowing sensations, feelings and thoughts to flow through, being in tune with one’s body as well as hearing, seeing and smelling our surroundings. The human body is suitable media for detecting variations in an environment (Nute 2014). Taking time to adjust to the visual deprivation, one begins to register a minutia of mundane details, such as the play of shadows of wind-animated foliage

on the asymmetrical apertures papered over in delicate *washi*. The environment in turn becomes a temporal register for the external world.

So pared down are its dimensions and absence of explicit design intentions, the universal quality of Tai-an and purity of idea it held have on the one hand made the Tai-an the template from which other typological improvisations and *senke* (tea schools) evolved. On the other hand, the Tai-an as the quintessential teahouse, was deemed an apt model for connecting the traditional teahouse with modern architecture principles, such as those designed by Sutemi Horiguchi (1895–1984) and his contemporary Koji Fujii (1888–1938) in the late 1920s (Fujimori 2007). So transformative was his experience in humility after visiting the Tai-an that it ignited Horiguchi's (1895–1984) expansive research into teahouses spanning the war and postwar years.<sup>2</sup> In other words, the Japanese teahouse as a provocative Idea is the perfect foil for different generations of architects to project what they wished to find. Tai-an's continued relevance across the centuries, whether as a recovered artefact of Sen no Rikyū's, or source of deep traditional culture, has paradoxically made it into an anachronism, outside of time and history.

These qualitative and rhetorical considerations guide our proposed installation of a faithfully produced full-scale replica of the Tai-an at the Venice Biennale for architecture. Originally fabricated for Hidekazu Nishizawa's lab in Kansai University for seismic testing, the yielding nature of the Tai-an's light timber frame proved its resilience against major tremors. The experiment directly affirmed the humble building's non-antagonistic relationship with time and natural events. With the project's conclusion, the model was disassembled and stored under the custody of *sukiya* carpenter Kunimitsu Hata, who will oversee its reassembly in Venice in 2025. Although other typologies of representative Japanese architecture, i.e. temple, noble houses and pavilions, have been featured in world expositions and major international exhibitions, the teahouse has never been showcased on such platforms. Perhaps it is as Okakura (1906, p. 77–78) claims, "The tea-room is not only different from any production of Western architecture, but also contrasts with the classical architecture of Japan itself." By no means the first to have distilled the experience of the teahouse as an abstract experience, Kengo Kuma's experimental series of translucent, seemingly weightless and ephemeral tea structures aspired to dematerialised architecture – from the expandable *Washi Tea Room "Seigaiha"* (2005) and *Oribe Tea House* (2005) formed out of paper and plastic respectively, to the pneumatic *T-Room* (2005) and *Teahouse of the Museum of Applied Arts Frankfurt* (2005–2007). His *T-Room* installation at the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art in Kanazawa sought a time-based experience that employed programmed audio, visual and tactile stimuli to engage the senses.

In view of the Tai-an's cultural significance, I ponder how might we draw on the palpable weight of the past, the wealth of accumulated knowledge inferred, and attempt to make something of inherent "Japan-ness" (following Isozaki 2011) relatable to a global audience? Accepting that in the continuum of time, buildings can alternatively be not treated as immutable objects created by a single author but are adaptable, and reinterpretable. What remains intact are the ideals they hold within and are themselves never a finished version.

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<sup>2</sup> For an introduction in English, see Li and Zhou (2021). A retrospective of Horiguchi's work, "Explorations of Horiguchi Sutemi: Modernism, Rikyu, Garden and Waka" (August – October 2024), is ongoing at the National Archives of Modern Architecture in Tokyo. The third section of the exhibition, covering the years 1940 to 1959, features his survey drawings and research on teahouses in Japan.

How would a renewed interpretation and translation expose the “thickness of time” (Hale 2015) that may arise from the narrative gaps in constructing future imaginaries?

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## **Short Biography**

Simone Shu-Yeng Chung holds a Ph.D. in architecture from the University of Cambridge and practiced as a chartered architect in London. After completing her studies at The Bartlett, University College London, and the Architectural Association School of Architecture, she spent a year in Italy at The British School at Rome as a Rome Scholar in Architecture and Urban Design. Subsequent achievements include the Japan Foundation Asia Center fellowship and CCA Research Fellowship. In 2020–21, Chung served as a curator for the Singapore Pavilion at the Venice Biennale and edited its catalogue. She is currently a GATES Research Fellow funded by ANR-France 2030 at Université Grenoble Alpes.