

Chabashira

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Admit it, *matcha* is one of the things that comes to mind whenever you hear about Japan. The boom in cafes and milk tea shops in the Philippines has brought several tea flavors from eastern Asia, and matcha always had a special section on the menus of most shops. However, the matcha we consume is not the same as the matcha that was consumed in the high culture of Japan, or what we read in history books. In some way, the difference among forms, experiences, and knowledge about Japanese tea is the lingering distance between our imagination and a reality that is yet to be experienced.

If you are an avid tea drinker and a Japan enthusiast like me, you will want to read more about the history of tea in the country. You will find that Japanese tea has quite an importance. They have this very formal tea ceremony called *chanoyu* or *sadō*, a tea production capital in Uji, tea expressions like *chabashira* (upright-floating tea stalk) which is an omen of good luck, and other various tea practices and expressions.

On the other hand, donning the Asian Studies thinking hat, you'll see that there are more stories behind the cool details about tea. For example, the *chanoyu* that we experience for the sake of cultural appreciation was actually a political practice in forming alliances or in discussing national affairs in the earlier times (Surak 2013). The practices involved in drinking tea signify

hierarchical relations between the server and the drinker. And nowadays, the quality and strength of tea production are slowly declining due to the pandemic and the aging population of tea farmers (The Yomiuri Shimbun 2021). This information may overwhelm a casual tea enthusiast, but we need to understand that there will always be something beyond the surface.

My obsession with Japanese tea earned me a ticket to Japan when I participated in an essay contest organized by the UP Asian Center. The theme was for us to write how we want to experience Japan, and the prize was a study tour in the country. In my entry, I wrote quite brazenly that I wanted to disabuse myself from an imagined Japan, drink tea in Uji, and interact with the locals aiming to share their realities, as if these were the easiest things to do. And yes, almost all of these brazen ideas had to be rethought when I realized that not much of what I wrote accorded with the places and experiences in our itinerary.

Investigating beyond the realm of common knowledge about Asia was one of the good things I am learning as an Asian Studies student. I was also able to learn how to correct misconceptions, and to explore the actual realities of a country.

In any case, throughout the trip, the experience and knowledge I gained were incredible! We visited the historical legacies and landmarks through the streets, shrines, and castles of Kyoto, Nara, Osaka, and parts of the Kansai region. History does bleed through the present as artifacts and cultural heritage have become a part of Japan's economic and cultural landscape. We walked through a number of quiet residential streets and alleys and immersed ourselves in the mundane and yet tranquil feeling we seldom experience in the Philippines. The enveloping silence brought peace and comfort for me, while one of my companions said that it had an air of loneliness.

In terms of language, well, it was not really *daijoubu* (okay) but it was really *omoshiroi* (interesting). I cannot remember how many times I smiled from the confusion and felt myself crying inside whenever I spoke with a

Japanese. My *Genki* book 1 and 2 level of Japanese were surely not enough. The *jikoshoukai* (self-introduction) of Osaka and Ryukoku University students was on a whole new level, and their conversation pattern was different from that in anime or other media we consume. I surprisingly survived, not because my brain suddenly downloaded a language pack, but because the students were also eager to converse in English. At least, based on those very small interactions, I can attest that the aversion of Japanese towards a foreign language is not that strong anymore.

I also learned about the business philosophy of Panasonic as we toured their museum and had dinner with the CEO. From my understanding, their propensity to form groups and do business in groups was quite evident. It was a different take from western capitalism where individual competition and survival of the fittest were the name of the game.

Returning to tea, I was able to acquire first-hand experience on how it is actually used, sold, and marketed in Japan. Granted, tea ceremonies and top-grade teas are valuable goods and services, and its rarity adds to its value. On the other hand, tea was also everywhere and in different forms. Unfortunately, we were not able to experience the tea ceremony but looking back, I was quite content about missing it as I am not a very formal person; and drinking tea casually may be more suitable to my taste. This may probably be the case for other Japanese. Over time, the consumption of tea changed in accordance with the pace of life in Japan. Back in our daily trips, when we stayed in a *ryokan* (inn) and wanted to drink tea, the teapot was always be there for us to use, along with loose *sencha* tea to brew. On the other hand, when we were on the go, there were cold and hot tea bottles from the *konbini* (convenience store) in our area. Restaurants and hotel buffets had tea bags of assorted flavors, which I silently pocketed as souvenirs. The shops also had rows of teas packed in different colorful containers. I bought a lot and all of them are empty now, the cases serving containers for random trinkets.

I find tea a grand example of how historical and cultural heritage can blend in modern society. Tea withstood the vicissitudes of time, acquiring certain social, philosophical, and cultural meanings in different eras and

changing to keep up with modernity. At present, its simple traces can be seen in tea dispensers and tea bags distributed in restaurants, tea bottles and powdered teas in shops, or tea leaves you need to boil yourself. The stalks are often filtered and the expression *chabashira* can only be said when you take the effort to brew loose tea and find that a fine stalk had escaped through the filter of the teapot. Noticeably, the present tea ceremony has been stripped of its pomp, sophistication, and exclusivity.

It is obvious that the trip has made me realize that there is a difference between an imagined and the actual Japan. I am an Asian Studies student, visiting this country will greatly help in grounding my approach and research. I hope that in the near future, when the pandemic has truly eased, more opportunities of exchange between Philippines and Japan scholars may come our way.

About the Author

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Acknowledgments and Declaration of Funding

This essay was submitted as a post-study tour requirement. The author went on a study tour from 15 to 20 December 2019 funded and organized by the K. Matsushita Foundation.

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