

Okakura Kakuzo and *The Book of Tea* – The Role of Culture in a Military Age –

By Fred George Notehelfer

Introduction

The year 1905 was important in the modern history of Japan. In January General Nogi Maresuke defeated the Russians at Port Arthur, in September Admiral Togo Heihachiro annihilated Russia's Baltic fleet at Tsushima and by the end of the year Theodore Roosevelt arranged the peace conference at Portsmouth that ended the Russo-Japanese War. For the first time in the history of the modern world an Asian nation had defeated a major Western power. Japan's 50 year race to become equal with America and Europe had at last succeeded. Japan was suddenly a world power.

War and military victory underscored the course of Westernization and industrialization that Japan adopted after the Meiji Restoration (1868). Japan learned its military lessons well. Western attention in 1905-06 focused heavily on Japan's military accomplishments. Japanese patriotism, bravery and loyalty – the willingness of Japanese troops to sacrifice their lives freely for the state and Emperor – had become regular newspaper fare in Europe and America. Pride at home focused equally on Japan's military achievements and on her military heritage. The general image of Japan in 1905-06 was that she had successfully joined the West in the social-Darwinistic struggle for survival among nations, and that she had succeeded because of her own unique military tradition.

It is interesting that two of Japan's most important English-language books appeared at this time. The first was Nitobe Inazo's *Bushido* (1905); the second was Okakura Kakuzo (Tenshin)'s *The Book of Tea* (1906). Given the context outlined above, Nitobe's immensely popular *Bushido*, which sought to explain Japan's samurai tradi-

tion and warrior ethics to the Western reader, appears to have been a timely work. Theodore Roosevelt, we are told, was so impressed by Nitobe's book that he ordered 60 copies to distribute to his family and friends. And yet, given the same context, *The Book of Tea*, which was equally popular in the West, strikes one as a curious anomaly. What does the "way of tea" have to do with a military age? To answer this question in typically Okakura fashion is to say "Nothing!" and "Everything!" It is here that our look at Okakura and *The Book of Tea* has to begin.

Family Background and Upbringing

To understand Okakura one has to take a closer look at who he was and the world that shaped his development. Okakura was born in Yokohama (Kanagawa Prefecture) in 1862 three years after this small village became Japan's leading treaty port. His father, a former samurai from Fukui, served as a silk merchant for the Echizen domain in the last years of the Tokugawa shogunate. His mother, known only as "this woman," was someone his father had met on the road to Edo. Okakura's memory of her was that she was always very busy and had no time to take care of him. In short, the boy, born in the "corner of the warehouse," which is what Kakuzo implied, was much neglected.

And yet, two forces emerged in this environment that shaped his future. One was that his father brought in a woman, Tsune, who was related to Hashimoto Sanai, the Fukui loyalist, to take care of his son. Tsune instilled in him the values of the Restoration heroes, particularly those who supported the *sonno joi* (revere the Emperor, expel the barbarians) movement. She also emphasized the family's samurai

heritage. The second involved his education. Okakura's early training was almost entirely in English. His father believed that learning English was far more important than the Confucian studies typical of a samurai education. To this end he sent Kakuzo to study in the homes of J.C. Hepburn and S.R. Brown, two of the best known American missionaries in Yokohama; later he also studied with John Ballagh and his wife.

The young Okakura became fluent in English and, more importantly, was socialized among foreigners. This had significant consequences. As Irokawa Daikichi and others have argued, he never felt the sense of inferiority towards the West that was common among many Meiji intellectuals. On the contrary, Okakura got on well with Americans and Europeans throughout his career. At the same time, his familiarity with China and Japan, that is his early knowledge of East Asia and the Japanese tradition, was limited. To his father's chagrin he could not read a single Japanese character on the occasion of a visit to the former city of Edo in 1870. The result was his quick dispatch to a temple for formal training in the Japanese language and a study of the Chinese classics that Okakura interpreted as an expulsion from his home.

To reverse Irokawa's argument it may be possible to say that one of the dynamics in Okakura's life was this early dilemma: a confidence in his knowledge of the West was counterbalanced by an initial lack of confidence and familiarity with things Japanese and Eastern. It is worth noting that much of his life involved an effort to transcend this dilemma. As we shall see, Okakura wrote extensively about Japan and Asia, but much of his written work was in English. In fact, he never wrote as powerfully in Japanese as he did in English. Even his Japanese calli-

Photo: Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music

graphic style was eccentric and designed to cover his writing deficiencies. Moreover the tools he brought to his analysis of Japan, China and India were heavily Western in their theoretical origins.

Behind *The Book of Tea* there lies then the gradual development of a complicated process by which Okakura sought to transcend the duality of his upbringing between the East and the West. With time he saw his role as becoming the defender of the East Asian tradition. As we shall see the best means to that end lay in the tools provided him by his Western education.

Tokyo Daigaku

Okakura's Yokohama background led him to Tokyo Daigaku (now the University of Tokyo) in the late 1870s. At Tokyo Daigaku, he studied philosophy with Ernest Fenollosa and English literature with William Houghton. Like others he hoped for a career in government and prepared himself for politics by writing his graduating thesis on "The Theory of the State." Unusual circumstances now pushed him in new directions. Okakura's youthful wife, bored and disgruntled by his scholarly obsession, threw his thesis into the fire. With insufficient time to rewrite his study on the state, he opted instead for a new work on "The Theory of Art." This fateful choice determined much of his career. Instead of politics, Okakura now entered the world of art administration in the Ministry of Education.

Art Administrator

From 1881 to the end of the century Okakura became Japan's most important art administrator and art historian. It was also during these years that his ideas and career became closely linked to those of Fenollosa and the idealistic Hegelian thought he brought to Japan. Here we can only touch briefly on Okakura's official role, but what it demonstrated is that he was clearly a rising star in the art world. There are those who credit Okakura and Fenollosa with saving Japanese art dur-



A portrait of Okakura Kakuzo

ing these crucial years, though many scholars now see this is largely an exaggeration. Both men did, however, work assiduously (with Kuki Ryuichi and others) to classify important Japanese works of art and in the process created the idea of "National Treasures" that should be preserved in Japan. Deciding on important works of art meant careful study and analysis of art history. Okakura soon realized that there were always historical as well as contemporary issues that pressed on the art administrator. Was calligraphy a fine art? Using Western concepts, some Meiji Japanese thought not. Okakura insisted that it was. A few years later he argued that the early Meiji decision to teach school children to draw with a pencil, instead of the traditional brush, was a mistake, and reversed the Ministry of Education's position by reinstating the brush.

In 1884 Okakura and Fenollosa founded the Kanga-Kai, an association

dedicated to the appreciation and propagation of the traditional arts. Through lectures and exhibitions sponsored by this society he and Fenollosa made every effort to awaken the Japanese public to traditional art values. Rejecting the westernizing trends of the early Meiji years they fought for the preservation of Japanese art forms. Working with the Kanga-Kai and government officials they laid plans for a national fine arts academy in which Japanese art ideals could be pursued. In 1886 Okakura, Fenollosa and Hamao Arata traveled to Europe to survey art education and museum methods. The long planned Fine Arts School, or what later became Tokyo National University of Fine Arts & Music (Geidai), was established in 1889. The following year Okakura was formally made head of the school.

At Geidai Okakura sought not only to train the next generation of Japanese painters and sculptors but to push for a renovated conception of Japanese art that subsequently became known as *Nihonga* (Japanese paintings). Simultaneously he launched what became Japan's most important journal of art history, *Kokka*, through which he disseminated his ideas to the broader public. In many of these efforts Okakura became a staunch defender of the past and often used his Western knowledge to undergird Japan's, and Asia's, historical importance. At the same time he was quite prepared to be critical of the West. On one occasion he referred to the painters of Europe as a "bunch of empty imitators" that Japanese artists should not follow. Using his Hegelian idealism he argued that only the essence of Eastern spirituality (which he equated with the traditions of India, China and Japan) could be combined with Western materialism to produce a higher synthesis in art.

Critic of Western Imperialism

By the turn of the century Okakura moved beyond being an art administrator and art historian to become a severe critic of Western Imperialism. In 1901, after resigning from Geidai, he traveled

to India. While there he wrote a powerful anti-imperialist book *The Awakening of the East* that was not published until 1938. The same year he wrote *The Ideals of the East With Special Reference to the Arts of Japan* which was published in 1903. In 1904 he published *The Awakening of Japan*. At the core of each of these books there stood a strong confrontation with Western civilization. At the same time, Okakura idealized the concept of a united Asia that could be roused against the threat of Western imperialism. Unlike Fukuzawa Yukichi who argued that Japan would have to “leave Asia” and identify with the West, Okakura called for Japan to become the leader of Asian resistance. Japan’s mission, as he saw it, was to side with the victims of Western imperialism, not with those who sought to exploit Asia for their own ends. In this Okakura was genuinely idealistic. But, as will become apparent, anti-imperialism backed by an equally idealistic conception of Japan, while a powerful critical tool in dealing with the West’s subjugation of Asia, proved peculiarly defective as a tool for critically evaluating the Meiji political reality, which, far from adopting Okakura’s Asian ideals, tended to follow the Western model of military power to its logical imperialistic conclusions.

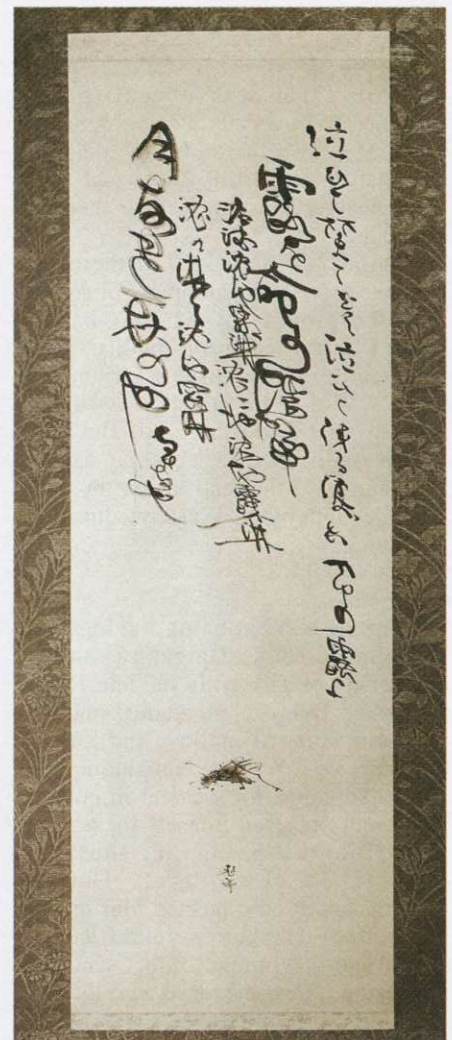
Here we must add that while the West associated Okakura chiefly with *The Book of Tea*, most Japanese, and many Asians, were to remember him for the opening lines of *The Ideals of the East* in which he declared that “Asia is one.” It was, of course, this pan-Asian theme that was subsequently exploited by the militarists of the 1930s and 1940s to support their vision of a united Asia, but this is not exactly what Okakura had in mind. As he saw it, Japan’s role in Asia was not to be one of military domination. For Okakura who remained firmly Hegelian in his idealism the ideals of Asia were embodied in its two great traditions. These he identified as Indian spirituality and Chinese humanism. Neither of these were essentially militaristic. Okakura liked to remind his readers

that the Chinese Emperor “alone among the great secular rulers of the world – never wears a sword.” It was these ideals, that is Indian spirituality carried to Japan by Buddhism and Chinese humanistic values carried by Confucianism, he argued, that achieved in Japan a remarkable synthesis under the particular genius of the Japanese people. Japan’s achievement, as Okakura explained, was to unify the polarities of Asian diversity. Japan’s role was to serve as the “living museum” and “repository of Asiatic thought and culture.” By the same logic he believed that Japan should become the defender of Asia.

Japan as Defender of Asia

But what kind of a defender of Asia should Japan become? Here too, those in charge of the Meiji military, had their own ideas. Japan’s defense against Western imperialism, as they saw it, should be Japan’s own version of imperialism. And yet, Okakura sensed that this method involved a dangerous trap. As he wrote, “the search for foreign knowledge, whereby we intend to combat our downfall, trains our minds to look from the mistaken standpoint of the alien.” The whole process of Western expansion was insidious in its destruction of Asian values. “Our ancestral ideals,” he wrote, “our family institutions, our ethics, our religions are daily fading away. Each succeeding generation loses moral stamina by contact with the Westerners ... we assist in the general demolition of all that is left to us.” “The imitation and worship of Europe,” he argued, “has at last become our natural regime.” And in the process what has become of Asia’s peaceful, tranquil and cooperative values? As he wrote in *The Awakening of the East*, “Oriental has become a synonym for the effeminate;” Asian “gentleness” has been identified by Westerners as “cowardice,” indeed, the term “native” has become an “epithet for slave.” And what has been the result for Asians? “In the name of commerce,” he wrote, “we have welcomed the militant, in the

Photo: TENSHIN MEMORIAL MUSEUM OF ART, IBARAKI



Okakura's eccentric calligraphic style

name of civilization we have embraced the imperialistic, in the name of Christianity we have prostrated before the merciless.”

Okakura believed that by imitating the West to defeat the West Japan was marching down a dangerous path. But in *The Awakening of the East* he had himself concluded that Asia’s only hope lay in a new “consciousness,” and that Asia’s only remedy was “The Sword.” In this sense he shared the urge of the Meiji leaders. But it was precisely Japan’s imitation of Western militarism that troubled Okakura. The West’s “over-burdened militarism,” he argued, was the heritage of a culture born of the hunt and chase. “Freedom, the sacred word of all humanity,” he

observed, "was to them the projection of individual enjoyment, not the harmony of an interrelated life. The strength of their community always lay in their power of combining to strike a common prey." Even Christianity, with its "message of Eastern peace," was never able to entirely subdue the West's aggressive instincts, and with the Renaissance, he argued, the West emerged from its "uncongenially Oriental atmosphere of religion," and burst into a new world "terrible in its brilliance, magnificent in its crimes." Adding the industrial revolution to its expanding arsenal, the "modern spirit," he wrote, flew "from God to gold." In the process the West had become a "huge machine, whose very life depends on finding markets for her goods." "War, is now declared from her factories," he lamented; "statesmanship [is] covered with the dust of her thundering mills." To Okakura Western militarism was out of control.

The Meaning of Tea

So why was Okakura's next book about tea? How does tea relate to a military age and imperialism? At one level *The Book of Tea* represents an effort to introduce the cult of "Teaism" to the West. In essence the book is about the "way of tea," but it is not about tea alone, it is really about culture, particularly the idea of tea as a symbolic expression of Japanese culture, and the importance of a cultural "way." At the surface level *The Book of Tea* traces the history of tea, indicates the phases through which its use went, and culminates in describing and discussing the values that came to be associated with the tea ceremony, or Teaism, that reached its peak in the Muromachi period (1333-1568). It charmingly places before the Western reader the ideas of the tea ceremony, flower arrangement, and the Taoist and Zen concepts that undergird the cult of Teaism, but it also has a profound subtextual level.

To me *The Book of Tea* has to be read within the context of the three books already mentioned, that is, with-

in the general portrait of Japanese culture that Okakura presented in them. By contrast to the aggressive West, Okakura viewed continental Asian civilization as communal, peaceful and passive. Writing in *The Book of Tea* he noted "we have created a harmony that is weak against aggression." He also knew that the original Japanese culture that received the continental inflow was hardly that of a peaceful, passive society, but rather the world of the *uji* warriors, the mounted clan warriors of the 5th and 6th centuries. Japan's earliest traditions had been clearly military. In this sense, Japanese society differed little from that of the West. It was into this context that continental Asian civilization flowed. As Okakura saw it from his Hegelian perspective, the greatness of the Muromachi period rested on the fact that during the 15th century a new synthesis emerged out of the polarities of Japan's military past and the culture of the continent. In the process raw military power, which differed little from that of the West, was brought under the control of a cultural way. What essentially happened was that the forces of culture humanized the Japanese military tradition. The military under the control of a restraining cultural way, Okakura argued, was also a part of the Tokugawa combination of *bun* (literary) and *bu* (military arts). For Okakura this was one of Japan's greatest historical achievements.

While Okakura wanted to believe that the restraint of culture on the military was still true of Meiji Japan, there are signs that he was not at all certain that it was. Japan, he was aware, now followed the Western military model. As he noted in *The Book of Tea* the West had called Japan "barbarous while she indulged in the gentle arts of peace," and now called her "civilized since she began to commit wholesale slaughter on Manchurian battlefields." He observed, moreover, that "much comment has been given lately to the Code of the Samurai, - the Art of Death which makes our soldiers exult in self-sacrifice; but scarcely any attention has been drawn to Teaism, which represents so much of our Art of Life."

At the subtext level it is therefore possible to argue that it was only too apparent to Okakura that by setting out to emulate the West in the Meiji period, Japan had followed Europe and America down the very path of raw unbridled military power that Japanese culture had so valiantly overcome in the Muromachi synthesis.

I have argued elsewhere that one of the tragedies of Okakura's life was that he could not bring himself to write a final critical book that looked at Japan's expanding militarism with the same analytical insights and passion that he brought to his critique of the West. As a firm cultural nationalist and son of a former samurai he inevitably shared the pride that other Japanese felt when Japan emerged as a world power in 1905. At the same time, it must be said on his behalf, that the use that Japanese militarists made of his ideas in the 1930s and 1940s involved a distinct misunderstanding of his thought. Okakura's vision of Japanese culture was clearly idealistic, but as my suggested reading of *The Book of Tea* implies, Okakura's idealistic vision incorporated a profoundly important idea, namely that the future of mankind may well depend on the degree to which all of us can bring our military systems under the control of a cultural way. In this sense *The Book of Tea* is a metaphor that reaches far beyond Meiji Japan. JUT

Note: I wish to thank the *Journal of Japanese Studies* for permission to use passages from my 1990 article, "On Idealism and Realism in the Thought of Okakura Tenshin" (Vol. 16, no.2). Citations for quoted passages can be found in that article.

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