

'Can Tea Save Commoners and Women? : The Tea Ceremony as a Non-Western, Non-political Public Sphere'

Date : October 20th, 2007 SAT

Vanue : Setagaya Campus, Library, AV hall

Today I would like to argue that an art called sado (tea ceremony), which developed in one corner of the non-West, is a public sphere different from that defined by Jürgen Habermas, namely a public sphere that does not necessarily produce political changes, and that this type of public sphere has its own significance. In presenting my argument, I focus on the social groups that participated in sado in the Edo period and in modern times.

●Habermas and Related Topics

To begin with, I have summarized Habermas's argument about the public sphere in my own way. He says that bourgeois public spheres formed gradually in Europe from the middle of the 17th century through the latter half of the 18th century as represented by coffee houses in Britain and salons in France, which were communication spheres free from the influence of state power. Cultured and economically affluent middle-class people who had time to spare began to create social background that encouraged open discussions through criticizing literature and music. Habermas argues that these gatherings also quickly became arenas for political criticism of the powers of the court and the church, leading to the birth of modern democracy.

The public sphere proposed by Habermas has several features. One such feature is referred to as manners of equality. The term means that the social standing of participating members becomes temporarily ineffective during discussions. At the same time, knowledge systems that had been taken for granted came to be viewed as problematic. In other words, people started to criticize and argue about the interpretation of philosophy and art over which the court and the church had great power. Since anyone with a certain amount of money and cultural literacy also had free access to the bourgeois public sphere, the participants in these arguments did not consider themselves privileged and instead, according to Habermas, saw themselves as representatives or mouthpieces of "the public". This suggests that these people were engaging in discussions in the belief that their opinions represented the views of the public.

In her book *Bonds of Civility: Aesthetic Networks and the Political Origins of Japanese Culture*, Eiko Ikegami argues that the public sphere described by Habermas is not applicable in a non-Western context, adding that a number of questions have been posed concerning its appropriateness even in terms of Western history. Ikegami consistently uses the word "paburikku ken" (public sphere) and not the word "kohkyo ken" (common sphere) as the Japanese equivalent for the English term "public sphere". According to her claim, the problems are that the word

“kohkyo” is taken to mean that there is only one place called public and that Habermas himself argued within this context. Ikegami criticizes Habermas’s logic in that he accepted the statement “We are kohkyo.” when made by a specific group of people in society referred to as the bourgeoisie. She takes the view that there are countless public spheres or fields in which different social and cognitive networks are in contact and intersect. Also she indicates that the public sphere is not necessarily accompanied by rational and critical arguments. By this Ikegami means there could be gatherings simply devoted to the appreciation of beauty in entertainment and culture. When we consider familiar examples of groups that coincide with Ikegami’s arguments, in addition to the discussions between bourgeois males who meet regularly, we can cite various types of one-off exchanges, which may not result in rational discussions. This is the case with bulletin boards on the Internet and chats during walks, where participants do not have any great responsibility for the consequences of their communication.

- Aesthetic Enclaves and Sado (tea ceremony) as Public Spheres

It appears that behind Ikegami’s criticism of Habermas lies her desire to discuss the Japanese “aesthetic enclaves”, or sedentary entertainment, from the Middle Ages such as renga (linked verse) and chanoyu (tea ceremony), which are public spheres that satisfy the requirements outlined above. Aesthetic enclaves arose in a world marked by rampant civil wars and subsequent confusion in social status following the Ohnin War. It was the time when people began to feel stronger political demands to organize various forms of horizontal association in order to defend themselves. Ikegami claims that this phenomenon was accelerated by being coupled with the allure of art, which created another world reality outside the feudalistic order.

One primary feature of the aesthetic enclaves is that they are a type of “hidden public sphere”. In other words, the public sphere is set apart from the established social order, and is voluntarily attended by individuals from different social backgrounds. The public sphere of aesthetic enclaves is also a “public sphere of beauty”. It used to be a place where people sought genuinely aesthetic and non-political beauty. This kind of place is based on a concept that *gei* (art) is born from interaction in a *za* (circle of seated people). Conversely, *za* is a circle of seated people in which art is created extempore. To prove this, Ikegami argues that there are very few *rengas* that are politically critical or offensive. If we look at the tea ceremony, I agree with Ikegami in that the art is performed at least ostensibly to enjoy a sense of the season, or to celebrate or mourn life events.

Now let me focus on the Tokugawa period. Behind the tea ceremony in this era was a clear class system consisting of warriors, farmers, artisans and tradesmen established by the *bakufu* (shogunate). However, warriors became keen on entertainment in a peaceful world. On the other hand, farmers, artisans and tradesmen also became so affluent that they could afford to enjoy entertainment. This allowed warriors and the commoners they ruled to enjoy the same things although they did not necessarily share the same occasions. This seems to have been most typical of the tea ceremony. The three branches of Sen School of tea ceremony, that was founded by the descendents of the great tea master Sen-no Rikyu, became popular from around the late 17th

century. While acting as tea ceremony teachers for daimyo (feudal lords), those belonging to the school also taught the art of the tea ceremony to wealthy townspeople and farmers who descended on them. The iemoto system (the system of licensing the teaching of Japanese traditional arts) was then established in the Tokugawa period, when a large number of pupils were eager to take tea ceremony lessons. This resulted in all those in the same school being treated as a pseudo-family. The licensed practitioners were allowed to have “tea names” consisting of one character taken from the name of the head of the school and another from their own names. This made those who were given the names by the heads of their schools feel as though they were their children, and thus the pupils acted as if they were brothers or sisters regardless of their social standing. This also helped to make it easier for them to escape from their real identity and social status.

The gravity of the discipline in the tea ceremony shifted from males to females during the period between the Meiji Restoration and the end of World War. With the abolition of the class system of warriors, farmers, artisans and tradesmen that came about with the Meiji Restoration, the heads of tea ceremony schools lost their jobs teaching the art to warriors who had patronized them, and suffered economic difficulties. They found a way out of these hardships by cultivating groups of women as a new market. A system was soon established for women to obtain a license and teach the art of the tea ceremony to other women. However, it appears that those women were required to make use of the art and etiquette that they cultivated by practicing the tea ceremony mainly in their homes, or domestic spheres, but not in public spheres. When did women start going out for social interaction with others through the medium of the tea ceremony? I think it was after the end of the Second World War.

●Contemporary Tea Ceremony

Slightly less than 10 years ago, I targeted five groups that were practicing the tea ceremony, and I undertook fieldwork that consisted of participant observation and interviews. The majority of the women I encountered were housewives in their fifties and sixties. Having married in the 1960s, they had already finished raising their children at the time of my survey. As my fieldwork progressed, I noticed that there was a remarkable resemblance between farmers, artisans and tradesmen in the feudal era and the women who made their homes during the post-war era of high economic growth. Initially I thought I was the first to detect this similarity, but historian Matsunosuke Nishiyama had already offered similar argument, and had pointed out the resemblance in his book *Iemoto no kenkyu* [Study of iemoto].

In Japan, it is known that women were given freedom to act on their own initiative only after the end of the war. However, sociologist Emiko Ochiai says that after the war women’s ways of living were standardized and, far from participating in public affairs, they took up housekeeping. Ochiai’s argument is that the majority of women became housewives when the majority of men became salaried workers, and their entering into a life of domesticity became the norm. This can be likened to people in the Edo period who, despite having money and time, were shackled by their social positions. Nishiyama says that these men in feudal social classes gave vent to their dissatisfaction

by becoming involved in the world of performing arts, adding that this closely resembles the way in which women took to the performing arts in the post-war years. He also notes that celebrities, the rich and intellectuals, who are viewed as upper class people in society, come together in the world of traditional performing arts, and even housewives have the opportunity to mix with them. Personally, I have some doubts about Nishiyama's argument. In my view, not all females practicing the tea ceremony have access to a group of these select people and the opportunity to associate with them.

Then, what public sphere do women enter and how do they construct it? There seem to be three steps. In the first step, like-minded people meet to practice the tea ceremony by participating in a shachu (troupe) consisting of one teacher and more than one pupil. This is a semi-private space rather than a public one. In the next step, people who have become friends in the shachu hold a formal tea gathering or go out to attend one arranged by someone else. This makes it possible for them to meet an unspecified number of people studying the tea ceremony and enjoy one-off exchanges saying, for example, "This china bowl has a summer-like taste, doesn't it?" In the last step, members of the shachu comes to be more visible in society by, for example, making tea together at the request of community cultural festivals, or by individually going out to participate in events such as a study meeting on tea artifacts in an art museum. This leads to exchanges with people in various professions and social positions, such as the clergy at Buddhist temples or Shinto shrines, mayors, craftsmen, and museum curators. Thus they will finally be known as women who practice the tea ceremony and will be treated with respect as champions of traditional culture. The women acquire social status in this way.

- Summary

The question is what significance the public sphere of the tea ceremony will have for those involved in it. If we review the similarity between the classes of farmers, artisans and tradesmen and women in post-war years before looking at the issue, it will become clear that they are a social group unable to climb to the top of the political ladder despite their economic affluence. In the sphere called the tea ceremony where the established social order becomes temporarily ineffective, even these people could associate with others who are in higher social positions. In particular, post-war women have been held in high esteem as champions of traditional culture in society.

It seems that such a process has a significant empowerment function. However, this is not designed to enable women to gain political or economic power. Instead, empowerment implies the recognition of women as respectable members of society, prompting them to act with self-confidence and not at the will of others. This provides great personal relief for individual women. Nonetheless, such a public sphere of art is not intended to drastically alter the framework of society. And the people concerned do not seem to feel the need for change. The women have a feeling of accomplishment at having strongly supported their families. Their achievements will become meaningless if they are skeptical of their present situation. Therefore, it appears that they are seeking empowerment within the current framework.