

From Austere *Wabi* to Golden *Wabi*

Review >
Japan

The word *wabi* is often defined as an awareness of the beauty of the irregular and imperfect – typical of the Japanese aesthetic consciousness. The term, however, contains more than that and is in fact extremely difficult to grasp. In his article ‘The *Wabi* Aesthetic through the Ages’, Haga Kōshirō places the concept of *wabi* next to the *nō* theatre’s *yugen* (mystery and depth) and *haiku* poetry’s *sabi* (lonely beauty).*



Chshitsu ‘Chisuitei’. Tearoom with distorted pillar. In Tanaka Sen’ō’s book entitled *The Tea Ceremony*. Photograph by Mariko Kanatsugi.

Taken from the book under review.

By Anna Beerens

Although Haga’s article is about *wabi* as an aesthetic term, he points out that *wabi* also is a way of life, which ‘means not being trapped by worldly values but finding a transcendental serenity apart from the world’ (op. cit., p. 196). The aim of Minna Torniaainen’s book, *From Austere Wabi to Golden Wabi, Philosophical and Aesthetic Aspects of Wabi in the Way of Tea*, is to explore both aspects of *wabi*, taking a number of tea classics as her point of departure. Ironically, she does not mention Haga Kōshirō’s work.

Any study discussing this elusive concept in a structured and organized way would no doubt be welcomed by all students of Japanese culture. Unfortunately, Torniaainen’s book is not a structured survey. I am afraid it can only be characterized as a largely useless collage of exegetical musings, which is neither a historical, nor a philosophical account of *wabi*. Indeed, there is so much wrong with this book, that if it were a paper produced by a student, I would not know where to start correcting and would be forced to hand it back with the advice to begin all over again. To produce a succinct review is equally difficult, and I have to limit myself to a few points which hopefully will illuminate my objections to this book.

First of all, the book is not a historical study as the phrase ‘*From Austere Wabi to Golden Wabi*’ in the title might suggest. Although the question of how *wabi* has developed into its present form or forms is mentioned in the introduction (p. 14) as one of the problems this study is going to tackle, her ‘from ... to ...’ merely means that she is going to discuss all forms of *wabi*, and does not imply a historical framework. Torniaainen is of the opinion that all forms of *wabi* she presents in her study ‘have existed side by side from the beginning’, an argument she also uses to justify her indiscriminate use of source material derived from three hundred years of writing on tea. When she uses nineteenth-century material to elucidate some issue in a sixteenth-century text, this is acceptable only when one concurs with the idea of contemporaneity of all forms of *wabi*. I do not, but even if one would go along with Torniaainen, why then does she say that ‘the concept of *wabi* may be seen to be partially cumulative’ and that ‘nuances assigned to it earlier ... may come to be reinterpreted in a new light’?

Indeed, to study the development of *wabi* without reference to some historical process seems to be untenable. Still, Torniaainen states that she is not going to ‘show how the

notion of *wabi* has changed through these three hundred years’ (pp. 14–15) and thus, when she mentions some tradition or legacy, she usually does so without clearly defining the historical context. The brief introduction to the history of the Way of Tea at the beginning of the book (pp. 1–14) is apparently supposed to be sufficient, and a discussion of the development of *wabi* as a literary term has to wait until page 259. I personally consider the description of Takeno Jō-ō’s and Sen Rikyū’s taste in tea utensils as reflected in diaries of tea gatherings (pp. 202–37), which is a(n) (unacknowledged) discussion of historical development, as the most interesting part of the book.

The lack of a historical framework would not be a serious want, had Torniaainen provided some alternative construction to support her story. Although she has a good knowledge of tea literature, both classic and modern, and her arguments are firmly rooted in this, she leaves so much undefined and implicit that this gives rise to a sense of inarticulateness. For what does the author’s discussion of ‘*wabi* as a philosophical concept’ mean, when it is never explained what philosophy she is using? In fact, the discussion is not so much about the philosophy mentioned in her title as it is about spirituality, more specifically the spirituality of tea and its effect in the ‘*wabi* mind’. This ‘*wabi* mind’ might be distinguished from the sense of *wabi* that can be present in objects, i.e. the *wabi* aesthetic. This distinction is the only underlying structure for the book I have been able to find, although it is not clearly presented in this way by Torniaainen herself, despite the title of the book. Maybe she does not distinguish sharply between the ‘*wabi* mind’ and ‘*wabi* aesthetic’, because, as she suggests herself, it is not even a valid distinction; after all, the spiritual attitude required for and acquired by the practice of the Way of Tea is necessary in order to appreciate the *wabi* spirit in objects. And still, her book seems to be built around this dichotomy.

Not only does Torniaainen fail to tell us about her philosophy, but she also fails to define her central concepts. She sets out with seven characteristics to describe *wabi* as a philosophical concept (p. 42). This characterization (Torniaainen also uses the word ‘classification’ which is not the same thing) provides us with an enumerative definition of the term ‘*wabi* mind’, a concept which is suddenly introduced into her account. In what follows, the terms *wabi* and ‘*wabi* mind’ are not clearly separated and in the course of the book the term ‘*wabi* mind’ will be both identified with and distinguished from ‘the Buddha mind’, ‘the absolute state of mind’, ‘the ultimate state of freedom of the heart’, and ‘enlightenment’.

To make matters worse, in her translations and interpretations of the sources Torniaainen tries to avoid what she calls ‘the dictionary meaning’ of the relevant terms and instead reaches for the ‘philosophical connotations’. It is therefore not surprising that the translations are often biased and that

Torniaainen not always keeps her promise of putting interpretative additions between brackets. Her discussion of a quotation from the classic *Nanpōroku* (pp. 80–1) might serve as an example of her method and style. She translates as follows: ‘And again, in the state of not-a single-thing (*muichimotsu*), all the acts (behaviour) expressing spontaneous (unpretended) feelings, come out naturally here and there’. *Muichimotsu* does not need this abstruse rendering; its dictionary meaning is ‘to have nothing to call one’s own’, ‘to have no property’. Thus the passage could be translated: ‘Acts that excite emotion will spontaneously arise from a state of poverty’, which could be interpreted as ‘poverty stimulates creativity’. Torniaainen, however, interprets this way: ‘I think the core of information that this citation provides is the following: in the state of nothingness (*muichimotsu*) all acts become natural, spontaneous and unartificial. This kind of mind (heart) can only exist in the ultimate state of the heart, i.e., in the state of *satori*. Moreover, for the first time, in this state of nothingness it becomes possible for one to behave naturally’. I have to admit I feel at a loss reading this kind of sentences. Most of her argumentation is in the above vein.

It must be said that Torniaainen is more articulate in the chapters that deal with the aesthetics of *wabi*, but it is obvious everywhere that she has problems with the English language. Her style is rather idiosyncratic and often, even to a non-native speaker like me, does not feel like proper English. Sometimes this can produce hilarious results. How a sentence like ‘approaching seventy and reaching the style of Rikyū’s *chanoyu*, should not be done by any persons other than masters...’ (p. 75) could have escaped the attention of her correctors is a riddle to me.

What this book offers is a highly personal exegesis of a number of tea texts, which might be of interest to a small number of tea devotees. I can hardly see any other uses for the book. The list of tea utensils ‘owned or admired by Takeno Jō-ō’ (pp. 311–19) is useful, but the book cannot otherwise be used as a work of reference. It has no index, and the list of classical sources that Torniaainen has used suffers greatly from the fact that she fails to specify when a work was first composed and published, mentioning the publication dates of modern editions only. I do not mean to say that classic tea texts cannot or should not be approached with questions of a philosophical nature. Exploring the spirituality of tea in that way could be valuable and rewarding. This should, however, be undertaken in a much more disciplined way than Torniaainen has done here. One cannot help wishing that she had used her enthusiasm and skill for a less ambitious project. ◀

- Torniaainen, Minna, *From Austere Wabi to Golden Wabi. Philosophical and Aesthetic Aspects of Wabi in the Way of Tea*, Studia Orientalia nr. 90, Helsinki: Finnish Oriental Society (2000), 330 pp. ISBN 951-9380-47-7, ill.

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* Kōshirō, Haga, ‘The *Wabi* Aesthetic through the Ages’, Paul Varley and Kumakura Isao (eds), *Tea in Japan*, Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press (1989), pp. 195–230

Yūin Tsukubai. Wash-basin (*tsukubai*) at Yūin tearoom with Buddhist images engraved on the four sides. Konnichian.



Taken from the book under review.