

# sharing a bowl of tea

SUSTAINING A JAPANESE  
ART PRACTICE IN CANADA

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY LAM WONG

In her book, *Geisha*, Liza Dalby refers to New Year in Japan as the “beginning of all things.” New Year’s Day, Oshogatsu, marks a series of “firsts”—the first greeting of sunrise, the first shrine visit of the year, even the first primping of oneself before the mirror. Another ceremonious “first” important to practitioners of *Chado* (The Way of Tea, also known as *Chanoyu*, or more contentiously, the Japanese tea ceremony) is *Hatsugama* or “First Kettle,” which opens the Tea year for practitioners of the Urasenke School of Tea.

Practitioners in Vancouver and around the Canadian province of British Columbia (BC) also practice *Hatsugama*, although they are reminded by Tea teachers that it should be called *Hatsuyose* (the First Gathering for Tea) or *Hatsudate-shiki* (the first whisking of Tea) because officially *Hatsugama* refers only to the ceremony held in Kyoto. However, the Canadian Tea practitioners often refer to *Hatsugama* as they greet each other and recommit to Tea practice for another year by sharing sweets and a bowl of *matcha*, whisked green tea. *Matcha* is at the center of *Chanoyu* practice, with *Chanoyu* literally meaning “hot water for tea.”

People practice Tea in British Columbia for similar reasons as people in Japan. For many it constitutes *ikigai*, a reason for living that contributes meaning to their lives. Many practice it as a way of disciplining the body, developing graceful movements that can carry into other aspects of life. Others embrace it as their *shumi*, a word translated as “hobby,” a translation lacking the full sense of the Japanese term which references a deeply committed and often lifetime pursuit involving culturally valued self-education and self-development. As in Japan, Tea in Vancouver and surrounding areas involves social networking, relationship-building, and communal ties. In BC, *Chanoyu* has long been a means for those in the Japanese Canadian / *Nikkei* (people of Japanese descent) community to develop close attachments, and share news of what is happening among local *Nikkei* and those more recently arriving from Japan.

*Chado* serves to reaffirm a sense of community among *Nikkei* practitioners while also integrating non-Japanese interested in “things Japanese” and specifically training in the traditional way of tea. Tea builds bonds among its practitioners, who also learn about other Japan-connected





events, and pursue these interests together. Intersections with other Nikkei activities include Tea classes and demonstrations held at Nikkei Place, established following the decades-long and eventually successful campaign for Redress—recognition of wrongs to Japanese Canadians who were uprooted from their homes and communities and interned in camps for years during WWII, losing their accumulated property and savings. Funds from the Redress settlement went towards establishing a race relations foundation, and towards building Nikkei Place. Tea practitioners often participate in activities there focusing on Japanese Canadian history and heritage, which may also overlap with activities or events held by the Japanese Canadian Citizens Association in BC.

While early immigrants from Japan may have practiced Tea at home after arriving in Canada, the official history of Chanoyu practice in BC is traced to 1963, with over 60 years of involvement. In Japan, 60 years marks a full cycle, whether through a person's birthday or the anniversary of an institution or organization. A 60th birthday is called *kanreki*, and traditionally represents achievement of a full lifespan, symbolically marking the sense of coming “full

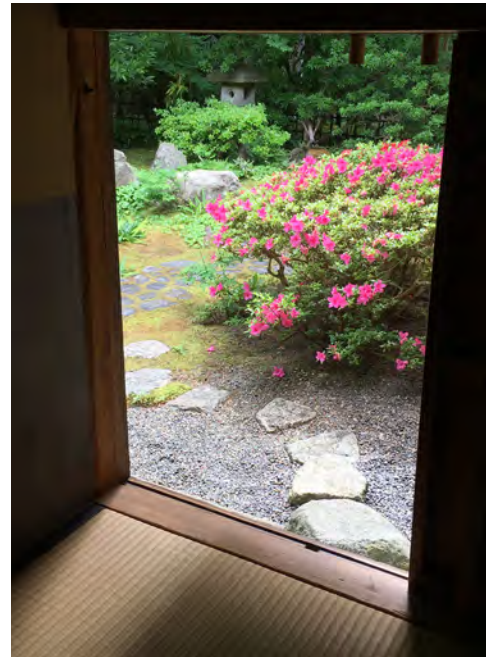
circle” or back to the origin point. Attaining the age of 60 means arriving again at the same combination of animal year (a 12-year zodiac cycle) and element year (wind, water, air, fire, earth) which presided at one's year of birth or, for an organization, at its foundation.

The history of Tea ritual practice in Vancouver also overlaps with the history of the University of British Columbia (UBC). In 1960, Nitobe Memorial Garden was created on UBC's campus to commemorate Inazo Nitobe, an educator from Morioka, Japan, who lived in BC and is well known for his personal slogan embracing cross-cultural understanding between Japan and North America—“I want to be a bridge across the Pacific”—now inscribed on a rock within the garden. This Japanese garden includes a fully functional teahouse. Sen Shoshitsu XIV, also known as Tantansai, the *Iemoto* (lineage head) of the Kyoto-based Urasenke School of Tea at that time, gave utensils and encouraged its use to expose people in North America to the Japanese Way of Tea. Urasenke sent Minamoto Soko-*sensei* to conduct initial teaching sessions. A Vancouver group of Tea practitioners officially formed in 1963 when a physics professor, Watanabe Tomiya, arrived at UBC accompanied



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Above: A group of the Urasenke school practitioners at the Ichibo-an tea house for a special chakai marking the 60th anniversary of the B.C. Urasenke group's official initiation. Photograph by Natalie Yozhik, courtesy of Tomoko Konagaya Peters.



by his wife, Watanabe Soshin-sensei, an advanced Tea practitioner who became the first long-term Tea instructor for local students.

Urasenke donated money for this project, and its Iemoto at the time, Hounsai Sen Soshitsu XV (who is still alive and active at over 100 years of age and the father of the current Iemoto), visited with his wife, Tomiko, to refurbish and reopen the garden in 1994. They gave it the name Ichibo-an, which can mean a retreat with a “wide sweeping view,” reflecting Nitobe’s desire for cross-cultural understanding, but can also mean a retreat of “one hope” or “one desire.” Keith Snyder-sensei, who trained at Urasenke in Kyoto, took over the primary teaching role, providing lessons at Nitobe Memorial Garden and Tozenji, a temple on the outskirts of Vancouver which has become a center for Urasenke practitioners throughout the province. The Japanese Canadian community has been actively involved with Nitobe Memorial Garden from early on, and a stone pagoda in the garden recognizes the internment of Japanese Canadians along with the concurrent “disappearance” of UBC students of Japanese descent.

In her book, *The Tea Ceremony and Women’s Empowerment in Modern Japan*, Etsuko Kato cites *shachu* and *sogo-bunka* as highly relevant to Japanese women’s involvement in Tea. *Shachu* refers to practitioners studying under the same teacher in the same lesson group. *Sogo-bunka* involves an approach of interdisciplinary study, and is a major focus of many Tea practitioners. Women practice Tea as a means of habituating their bodies to graceful movements, to learn a multitude of choreographed *temae* (specific tea ceremony procedures that vary with season and context), to study and help maintain one of Japan’s traditional arts, and to participate in an icon of Japanese identity. They also embrace a community of practice with others who share the pursuit for years or even decades.

Multiple Urasenke Tea teachers are active in the Vancouver area, each with multiple lesson groups. Participants from diverse teachers and locations meet up for *gyōji*, annual events during the Tea year, such as “First Tea,” *robiraki* (the opening of the hearth season), and often Western-inspired activities (also frequently present in Japan) such as a Christmas Tea Ceremony as well as demonstrations for the public. The Powell Street Festival, held each year in August, is a popular two-day event highlighting the Japanese Canadian community and its history in BC. It takes place in

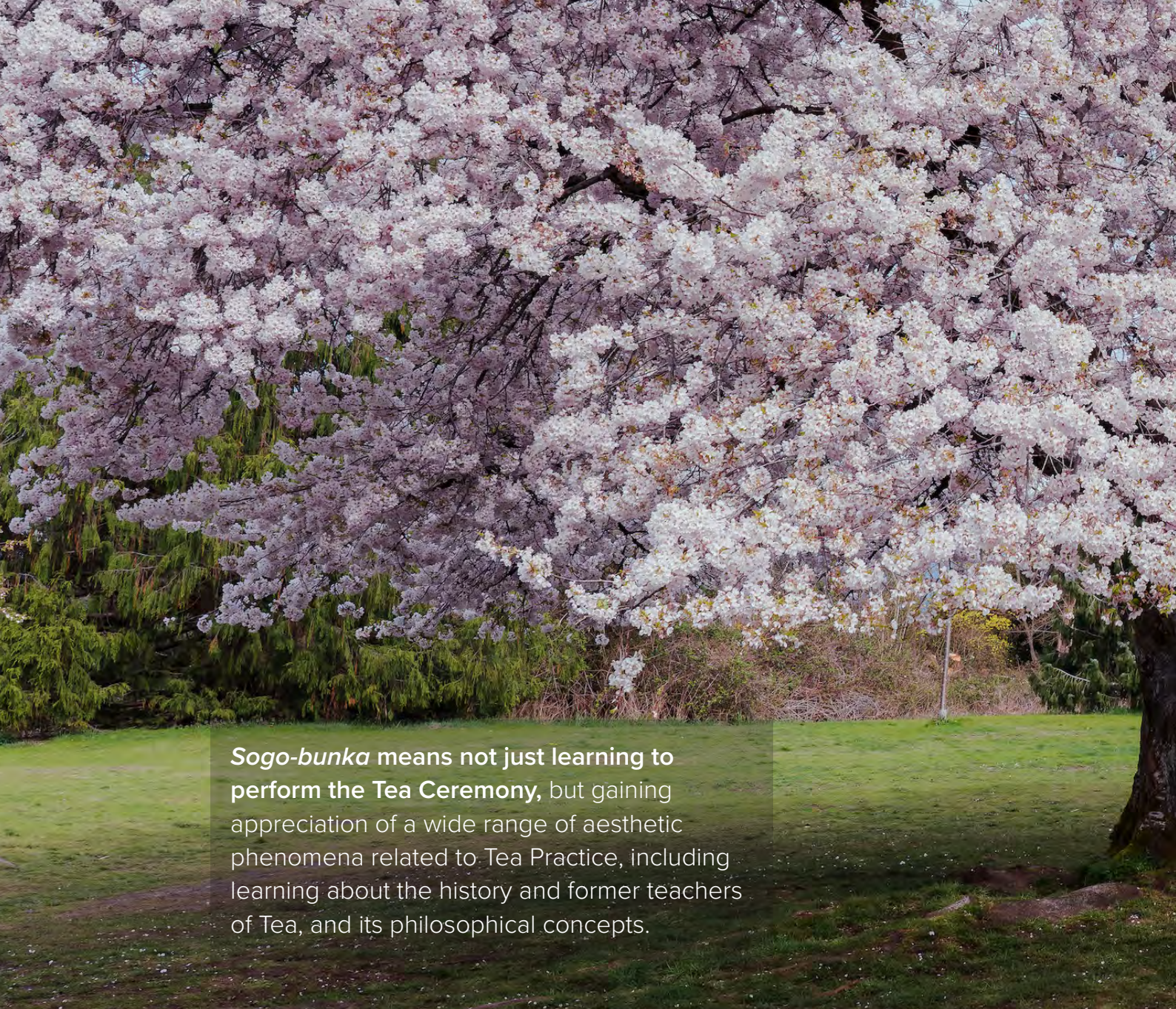
the historic area of Japanese immigrant concentration prior to the uprooting that occurred in WWII, which still hosts a long-established Japanese language school and Buddhist church. Urasenke Tea practitioners give demonstrations of Tea Ceremony practice in a *tatami* (rice straw mat) room of the renovated Japanese Language School and Hall.

Another annual occasion at which members provide demonstrations is Vancouver’s Sakura (Cherry Blossom) Festival held each spring. While this festival highlights Japanese traditions, it is less closely tied to the history of Japanese Canadians or the Nikkei community. Tea practitioners also come together to help with public demonstrations in the teahouse at Nitobe Memorial Garden, or when requested by organizations.

Whereas the above events and demonstrations bring together members from all Urasenke groups, the *shachu* remains the close intimate group that grants a strong sense of identity and inclusion for its members. Within each *shachu* the joys and sorrows of life are marked, as they are among Tea practitioners in Japan, including weddings, the births of children or grandchildren, and *kanreki*, 60th birthdays. *Shachu* members will note with sadness a colleague’s passing, perhaps attending the funeral or memorial service and commemorating the same anniversaries following a death that are commemorated in Japan.

*Sogo-bunka* means not just learning to perform the Tea Ceremony, but gaining appreciation of a wide range of aesthetic phenomena related to Tea Practice, including learning about the history and former teachers of Tea, and its philosophical concepts. Areas of interest may include calligraphy—such as that used on scrolls displayed for a Tea gathering—ceramics, *chabana* (“tea flowers”), *wagashi* (Japanese sweets), traditional architecture, gardening, etc. In Japan, groups of Tea practitioners might attend exhibitions showing famous ceramics for tea, or calligraphy, but such opportunities seldom occur in BC.

In Vancouver practitioners have begun to make *wagashi* for their lessons, and are getting quite skilled at this. Sometimes, however *sogo-bunka* activities in the Vancouver area vary from those in Japan. On one occasion BC Urasenke Tea practitioners chartered a bus to attend the Skagit Valley Tulip Festival, an annual event held across the U.S. border in Washington state. Studying about *chabana* and displaying flowers considered *chabana* in the alcove of a tearoom is common. However, tulips are not considered *chabana*, so



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a trip to view tulip fields might be unlikely in Japan. In Canada, awareness of *sogo-bunka* includes an interest in flowers and gardening generally, so even if tulips are not used in Tea Ceremony, attending a tulip festival aligns with the emphasis in *Chado* and in Japanese aesthetic practices on celebrating the four seasons.

Tea culture strongly emphasizes seasonality and a connection to place. Another example of a North American expression of this involves the trees in the Nitobe Memorial Garden. Previously the trees on the perimeter of the garden were pruned according to the lower heights expected in Japanese gardens. In recent years, however, these trees have

been allowed to grow freely to their full heights, in keeping with Indigenous ideas and practices of Northwest Coast Native communities.

In 2014 I created Canada's first university credit course in *Chado*. At that time, such a course was considered unusual and hence it was difficult to get the university curriculum committee's approval. For a full decade now UBC students have been able to learn academically about the history, philosophy, and Japanese cultural context of The Way of Tea and also experientially in sessions leading up to the *Chakai* (Tea gathering) that they participate in as culmination of the course. This class seems to reflect the



desire that Sen Soshitsu XIV expressed on his visit to the teahouse in Nitobe Memorial Garden in the early 1960s, that it should expose people to the Japanese Way of Tea. I teach the course in conjunction with Keith Snyder-sensei, who volunteers his time, along with others from various shachu in the Vancouver area. We aim to continue spreading appreciation of this Japanese traditional art form from a Japanese teahouse in a Japanese garden within a university campus in Canada.



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