

As the 13th Grand Master of Enshu School, Sojitsu Kobori has inherited the 400-year old legacy of his forefathers in the business of the tea ceremony – a Japanese art form steeped in tradition. He is already preparing his son for the next 400 years...

Enshu Sado School

By Setsuko Sakakibara

IN JAPAN THERE ARE OVER 100,000 companies with histories of more than 100 years and 700 companies with histories of more than 200 years. Most of these companies are assumed to be family businesses. The oldest among them is a construction company said to be founded in 578AD and still viable today. Enshu Sado School, one of the oldest established tea schools in Japan, dates back 400 years. Sado (tea ceremony) is a national culture for Japanese people and avidly pursued even in this hectic 21st century.

Today, the Enshu Sado School is run by Mr Sojitsu Kobori. He became the 13th Grand Master of Enshu School last year, succeeding his father when he was just 44 years old. As Grand Master he is in charge of 20 staff members; 30,000 nationwide practitioners; 53 local chapters throughout Japan; international chapters in Holland and Seoul; a school

in Singapore; and all the related works of exhibitions, lectures and demonstrations as well as production of various tea utensils including pottery and artistic works on scrolls. He also consults on the

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design of tea rooms and gardens, some of which are conducted through the school's Foundation or related companies. As Tea Master, his main exercise as well as source of income is giving lessons in tea ceremony. But he is also like a comprehensive art producer: the Grand Master is expected to be

almost an art form himself.

How did Sojitsu manage to acquire such diversified talents in art? “I learned everything from my father, the 12th Grand Master, and from all the previous Grand Masters, my ancestors”, Sojitsu says. Thus, each morning after getting up, he goes to the ancestor room to pay them respect. It is a fairly large room by Japanese standards where ancestors' mortuary tablets are enshrined. For Sojitsu, ancestors are a source of inexhaustible inspiration.

The Zen monks who brought tea to Japan laid the spiritual foundation for Sado, which explains the close ties between tea and spirituality. Sen Rikyu and other tea masters established Sado by bringing tea drinking to the level of an art.

History

Four hundred years ago, Lord Enshu Kobori (1579-1647) founded a new style



of tea ceremony, which is now called the Enshu Sado School. However, the ancestorship can be traced to Kodo Kobori who lived around 1400. It is said that the spirit of Enshu School lies in *kireisabi*, or gracefulness and simplicity. Enshu served as the official tea instructor for the second and third Shogun and was overwhelmingly versatile. He served as the construction commissioner in charge of building the famous Nagoya and Osaka castles. Also, the garden of Nanzenji Temple was built under his supervision and planning, where he succeeded in stylising nature. Enshu was richly talented in calligraphy and waka, 31-syllable Japanese poetry. He also rendered great services in instructing pottery making such as Shigaraki ware.

There were many ups and downs in the history of Sado reflecting the social conditions of the days: the hardest time being right after the Meiji Restoration of 1868 and after World War II when society paid little respect to tradition. However, Sojitsu considers “Stay with the style, yet go beyond it”, the motto of Enshu, an innovative approach responding to changes over time that has contributed to the successful continuation of Enshu.

Responsible for another 400 years

Grand Master Sojitsu is only 44 years old, but he might well be 400 years old because he has inherited the DNA and know-how of his forefathers. He is positive about the fact that this kind of business is handed down along the family line. This is a profession that requires immense sensitivity and thus commands cultivation since childhood.

The current theme of Enshu School is “By exploring the old, one becomes able to understand the new”. Sojitsu says, “I consider tradition a refinement. Throughout the history of 400 years, each Grand Master preserved what he considered important, and removed what he considered unimportant or wasteful elements, and added something unique of their own. One Grand Master might have obtained inspiration from the ideas of a Grand Master a few generations before him. You know tradition is not consumable”.

I can do my work as Grand Master thanks to ancestors and all the people around me who support me. This is the message I would like to convey to my children and society at large

Sojitsu confessed that as he approached adulthood, he came to worry if he could really be a good Master. But he never thought of shirking the responsibility of this important mission of bridging the family tradition, handing over the know-how of his forefathers to his successors. He is keenly aware that if he were to say no to this important role, it would create a chasm in what has become an important cultural tradition of this country, and in his view, this can not possibly be allowed to happen.

“I feel increasingly indebted to everybody around me. I can do my work as Grand Master thanks to ancestors, and all the people around me who support

me. This is the message I would like to convey to my children and society at large.” Sojitsu continued, “Since I have 400 years before me, I feel responsible for another 400 years. Though it may not be practical, I would at least like to make sure that my concept, along with what I have learned, be transferred to the 14th Grand Master – that will be my son – and to make sure that the transition to the 15th Grand Master will be done properly. I have to live long!”

Training and cultivation since childhood

Typical traditional Japanese performing arts include the Kabuki play, Kyogen comedy or Japanese dancing. Training for successors starts quite early. Would-be successors experience their first stage around 3 or 4 years old. Most of them recall how hard their training had been. One recalls that even during winter, in a stark cold room with no heating, the lesson went on and on until the Master (father) said it was finished. “Often father’s fan was thrown at me if I made same mistakes”, he said. Another remembers how he envied ordinary children enjoying baseball – because as the destined successor, he was either busy with a series of lessons or was on stage.

But for Sojitsu this was not the case. He did not begin formal tea lessons of Sado until he was 14 years old and prior to this, his upbringing was quite ordinary. Unlike the traditional performing arts the tea ceremony requires the participation of guests, and communication with guests is crucial, so it requires personality-building. “But”, he



Far left: The extended family of Sojitsu Kobori, including his parents (front centre), his brother and wife (back centre), and his own wife and children.

Centre: Lord Enshu Kobori, the founder of Enshu Sado School.

Left: An outside view of one of the Enshu tea rooms.

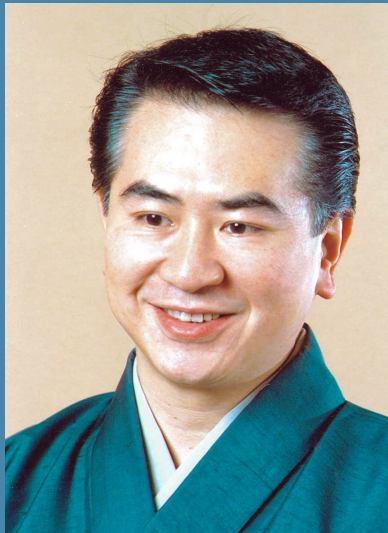
FOCUS: Enshu Sado School

says. "Come to think of it, Sado has always been a part of my life since childhood. Since I was 4 or 5 years old, I was asked by my father, the 12th Grand Master, to deliver tea bowls to the guests attending the ceremony. Through these experiences I learned a lot. I learned about timing, keeping harmony with the actions of guests, how to respond to their comments and the like. When we were on vacation, father took out a portable tea set and all the family members did tea. Since my father was an embodiment

I would like to make sure that what I have learned is transferred to my son and to make sure that the transition will be done properly – I have to live long!

of culture, a real tea person, to be with him undoubtedly cultivated my sensitivity. I might not have started learning innumerable actions and gaining the knowledge required for Sado until later on in my life, but in hindsight I believe all these childhood experiences seeped into and molded me".

After graduating from university with a degree in law, he attended a small Zen Temple for one year of learning, as the only disciple of the priest. He got up at 4am, swept the gardens and vast rooms



of the temple, and then prepared a meal for the priest and himself prior to studying sutra. He also started to study calligraphy, using text that his forefathers had used hundreds of years ago. He studied the history of Sado by reading the documents of his forefathers. After one year of self-teaching in this way at the temple, his father formally took him in to his establishment as a Grand Master candidate and provided training himself. For flower arranging, for example, his father just told him to watch. So, throughout one year he observed how the 12th Grand Master did the displays, sometimes being allowed to help by choosing the proper vase, and the like. After one year his father finally told him, "Now, you do it". Before long, and without realising it himself, Sojitsu had begun to possess knowledge on so many things – including the cuisine required for various occasions served at tea ceremony, the connoisseurship of antiques and Japanese history. He also succeeded in obtaining a rank at the Zen temple. Finally, one day his father decided he was ready as 13th Grand Master and for the first time in the history of Enshu, a new Grand Master was born while the previous Grand Master was still alive – a remarkable moment in the history of the business.

As for the training of his own son and

Above: Top – Sojitsu Koburi, the 13th Grand Master of Enshu School; Bottom – Sojitsu preparing tea.

Right: The Tokyo headquarters of Enshu Sado School, which includes the private quarters of the Kobori family.

Far right: Guests enjoying a meal at the tea ceremony.



successor, Sojitsu would like this to be a little better organised than his own experience had been. He relishes the prospect of telling his son about the joy of studying Sado and of being Grand Master.

Role of the family creed

In Japan there were many kakun (family creeds), recorded – the oldest known dates back to the 8th Century AD. These were products of a time when the family was an economic unit as well an emotional one. These creeds are still viable today because they reflect the wisdom of ancestors on how to live, how to do business and how to educate children. They still serve as a centripetal force for the family and for the business. “Teaching of Enshu Kobori”, the creed for Enshu, is just one page long and starts by being courteous to everybody according to Sojitsu’s interpretation; literally it says: royalty to master and filial piety. Next, the creed exhorts diligence in one’s work and heart to heart communication with friends. Then it goes on to say: “Such phenomena as spring mist, cuckoo under lush summer leaves, lonely sunset of autumn, dawn of snowy winter (illustrating susceptibility to seasonal changes and nature) will be occasions when you do Tea”. Lastly it says: “The sound of boiling water should not cease” – meaning always be ready to welcome friends. Sojitsu can recite every line of

HOW TO DRINK TEA

- **Step 1:** When tea is served, excuse yourself to the next guest by saying, “Excuse me for drinking before you”
- **Step 2:** Pick up the tea bowl with your right hand
- **Step 3:** Place the bowl on the palm of your left hand and then bow lightly
- **Step 4:** Lower your tea bowl to the height of your chest. With the bowl still resting on your left palm, grasp the rim of the right side with your right thumb and forefinger and turn the bowl about 90° clockwise
- **Step 5:** Take a sip and then bow lightly, saying the words, “This tastes really good”. Then drink the remaining tea in several sips
- **Step 6:** When you have drunk the last sip, keep the bowl in the palm of your left hand and wipe the rim of the bowl lightly with the tips of your right thumb and forefinger
- **Step 7:** Gaze at the bowl and appreciate its shape
- **Step 8:** Turn the bowl 90° clockwise so the front of the bowl faces the host
- **Step 9:** Use your right hand to put the bowl down gently on the tatami (mat)

the Enshu creed and it is evident that the creed is very alive in his everyday life.

Sojitsu is very assertive about his role in the society. “As illustrated in our creed, the essence of Sado is heart to heart communication. This, I believe, is very much lacking in contemporary Japan. Relationships between people have become shallow and people have become indifferent to each other, which is not unrelated to the increasing

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incidences of violence and apathy, especially among young people. Here, maybe as Sado Master, I can make a contribution to society. After all, every action of Sado is based on having consideration for others and being in their shoes”. ■

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