Sencha, a new type of tea from Ming and Qing China, opened a new phase of Japanese tea culture in the late Edo period. Steeping tea leaves in teapots, smelling, tasting, and drinking from small cups, advocates of sencha not only enjoyed the Chinese-style tea, but also scholarly discussion with peers and opportunities for creative activities. As an alternative to whipped tea or chanoyu, criticised for elitism and formalism at that time, sencha freed tea gatherings, and simply invited participants to appreciate the essence of tea and to go back to the origin of its tea culture, China.

1. Painting from Tanomura Chikuden, Matamata ichirekujō
Neiraku Museum of Art, Important Cultural Property
(Source: Munakata Ken’ichi, ed., Tanomura Chikuden kihon gafu zuhan hen, Dōhōsha, Tokyo 2011, p. 72)
The dynastic change from Ming to Qing transferred people and objects from China to Japan. Things from transitional China impacted the culture of Tokugawa Japan, including the way of tea. The arrival of the Ōbaku Zen Buddhism in the 17th century brought the custom of making tea with Chinese utensils. Manpuku-ji temple in Kyoto still preserves the teapot used by Ingen (1652–1673), the founder of the temple.1 In the 18th century, the Ōbaku monk Shiibayama Genrō (1735–1813), later called Baisa (the old man who sells tea), sold steeped tea on the streets of Kyoto. Baisa was highly influential in shaping the link between sencha and the literati (bunjin) ethos, with its critical non-conformist spirit, and its admiration of unconventionality.2 However, images of literati brewing and enjoying sencha were introduced in Japan much before the actual practice. Making tea in a Chinese setting was already depicted by Japanese painters from the Muromachi period, as Jōchi Mariko has pointed out.3

It was during the Edo period that the concept of Ming Chinese tea acquired materiality. By the 19th century, Japanese literati made sencha an essential part of scholarly life. Tanomura-Chikuden’s (1777–1835) famous album Matamata shioku jō (Yet again one more pleasure) may serve as an illustration of the refined Sinofilic atmosphere associated with sencha. Chikuden writes: “One day in the fourth month, early summer, welcoming a bosom friend to a mountainside temple. Shibayama Genshō [the old man who sells tea], sold steeped tea on the streets of Kyoto. Baisa was highly influential in shaping the link between sencha and the literati (bunjin) ethos, with its critical non-conformist spirit, and its admiration of unconventionality. However, images of literati brewing and enjoying sencha were introduced in Japan much before the actual practice. Making tea in a Chinese setting was already depicted by Japanese painters from the Muromachi period, as Jōchi Mariko has pointed out.1

This paper rethinks the display for sencha in the late Edo period, specifically during the 1820s and 1840s, within the context of scholars’ creative activities. I will first review the literature on the display of sencha, and subsequently discuss the relationship between participants and objects based on illustrated and written records of sencha gatherings, and objects for sencha.

From the late Edo period (1600–1868) until the early Shōwa era (1926–1989) a substantial number of illustrated catalogues of tea gatherings, known as meien zuroku (‘pictorial records of tea gatherings’), were published. Research of settings and architecture for steeped tea usually starts with Seiwa chokuyō (A record of the Azur Bay tea gathering). This monumental record of two grand-scale gatherings which took place in the second year of Bunki (1862) was compiled by Tanomura Chikuyen (1814–1907). Chikuden’s pupil and adopted son. The gatherings, which took place in the year of the six hundredth anniversary of Baisa’s death, were held to celebrate the quality of the water of the Yodogawa river, which had been praised by important sencha practitioners, such as Ingen, Baisa himself, and Chikuden.2 However, sencha displays also took place before the publication of meien zuroku. These, unfortunately, have so far not received sufficient attention. What did these displays look like? And why were settings for sencha not actively illustrated until the 1850s, even though people enjoyed sencha before then?

Settings for tea

In the second year of Hōei (1755), the incense practitioner and Confucianist from Osaka, Ōeda Ryūhō, published the earliest guidebook on sencha, explaining how to prepare good tea and how to enjoy it. In the section on where to drink tea, he claims, “whether or not you are in a house, you should steep tea wherever you can bend your knees,” indicating in this way that he felt no need to specify appropriate spaces for tea. Nevertheless, he mentions 24 suitable occasions for drinking steeped tea.3 He encourages his readers to drink tea in different conditions of the mind, not only when you are calm, but also when you are tired or restless.4 A range of creative literati activities are suggested as suitable to be accompanied by tea: listening to and commenting on songs, playing the qin, appreciating paintings, writing at a desk, and burning incense. Tea is also supposed to be at your side on social occasions including conversing with peers late at night, building a friendship, and taking care of your guests. You can have tea when you are in the midst of beautiful nature or poetic architectural scenes: on a clear windy day, when there are fresh leaves of beautiful nature or poetic architectural scenes: on a clear windy day, when there are fresh leaves
Display for tea

The appearance of a publication on display for sencha had to wait until the fifth year of Kaei (1852). It was in this year that Yamamoto Baiitsu (1783–1856) published Meien hinmoku (A list of items for a tea gathering) on the occasion of his 70th birthday. As figure 3 shows, the publication is more than just ‘a list’ as it depicts basic utensils to store, make and serve steeped tea in context, e.g. on the floor and in a small portable cabinet. Significantly, the items shown on the right, writing utensils, incense, fruits and a nyo (a Chinese sceptre) displayed on a table and on a strangely shaped piece of wood, indicate the literati atmosphere that had been characteristic of sencha from the beginning. This illustrated record shows us how Baiitsu, a literati painter and tea devotee, ‘curated’ his objects for this special occasion. The catalogue was more than the result of an event, the depicted display was an experiment in the relationality of things.

Prior to his Meien hinmoku, however, Baiitsu had created Seigojū, an album of display for sencha, compiled in the first year of Kōka (1844). This unique catalogue, now in a private collection, contains the earliest surviving examples of sencha display.1 There are 16 illustrations in the album, but one of them, ‘ink orchid’, is probably not an example of a display. The orchid is depicted in a natural way and without a vessel. The other 15 examples can be roughly categorised as bunjin, bössi, morimono, scholarly items and architectural settings. Bunjin is flower arrangement in the literati style, which was popular in the late Edo period, such as the chrysanthemum casually inserted in a porcelain vase in the sixth example of Seigojū (fig. 4a). Morimono refers to arrangements of flowers and fruit with various types of vessels and natural objects such as stoneware, baskets, rocks and interesting pieces of wood (figs 4b–d). Portable tea sets (fig. 4e) and scholars’ items for reading, writing, incense and music are also depicted (fig. 4f). Most of the examples are set in unspecified space, some are depicted as in a garden, windowsill, balcony by a lotus pond and in a studio (figs 4e–f). All the examples show combinations of natural and man-made objects, which, apart from their aesthetic value, have allegorical meanings based on Chinese prototypes. They basically express the desire for the good fortune of the guests and the fruitfulness of the gathering.2 The objects in the examples are related to the five senses: sight,
Comparison of the display examples of Seigojū with Meien Irevō suggests how the album worked in practice. Combinations of objects from Seigojū (figs 40–6) can be found in Baiitsu’s later record (fig. 3). Seigojū, his experiment in the arrangement of things, fertilised new ideas for actual display. In fact, while functioning as a prototype for display, the guidebook itself could be displayed at tea gatherings, as Baiitsu included a book in a display example.  Like gachō (paintings depicted in a painting), display itself could be displayed as an artwork.

Seigojū’s box and the album itself have inscriptions and marks by the scholar and poet Yanagawa Seigan (1789–1834). Seigan wrote that he read this catalogue at his house in the second year of Ansei (1855), a year before Baiitsu died. Seigan may have used Seigojū for his own tea displays, in this way reliving the friendship with Baiitsu while steeping tea.

Gatherings for tea

By the 1800s, practitioners of sencha began to feel the desire to record their tea gatherings. Artist sencha practitioners would record their gatherings through painting. Others reverted to different methods. For example, Koisu Genzui (1784–1849), a physician of Western and Chinese medicine in Kyoto, made written records because he was “not good at painting.” 40 Genzui was a friend of Baiitsu and a patron of literati artists. Two records was “not good at painting”.

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In Tempō 8 (1837), Genzui participated in the sencha gathering in memory of Fukushima Genho (1795–1837). Genho was not only one of Genzui’s sencha friends, but also his patient. Genho had suffered from internal disease and died earlier that year. 43 His friends assembled at the house of the painter Uragami Shunkin (1779–1846), who was Genzui’s neighbour. 44 At the gathering, five members had individual settings and displayed tea utensils and scholarly items. 45 In the room allocated to Genzui, he hung a scroll by a Ming painter depicting orchid and bamboo, which is now held at the Seikadō Bunko Art Museum in Setagaya, Tokyo. Nihon and hosa (fly whisk) were displayed on the wall, and an incense burner and incense container were set on a table. This time, too, he used Chinese tea utensils. In a porcelain vase, he arranged winter peonies. Iiyama Yoshitaka in Kanda, Edo.

The record describes the procedure of events for the gathering that day. Firstly, the host, Shunkin, burned incense for Genho’s spirit, then he welcomed the four other members of the group. He made tea and offered the first cup to the spirit. The others burned incense after which they, each in turn, assumed the role of host. Shunkin and Baiitsu both played the qin. They had a banquet around noon. The group had invited 20 guests, but over 40 people came to the gathering without invitation. 46 All in all, this gathering must have looked more like a ritual than like a social gathering of sencha lovers.

Around the time of this second gathering described by Genzui, the painter Tsukubi Chinzan (1801–1854) created a painted record of the lively atmosphere of the sencha gathering for the first birthday of Isyama Yoshitaka in Kanda, Edo. 47 For this album Chinzan, for instance, depicted the preparation and serving of the tea (fig. 7b). Two men on the right appreciate a teapot, the two men next to them are about to create their works on paper and fan. In another part of the record two men are discussing artworks, while others are engaged in playing and listening to music. 48 The participants also enjoy drinking sake, smoking and eating.

The information provided by Genzui’s description of two Kyoto gatherings and Chinzan’s record of a gathering in Edo, enables us to conclude that sencha gatherings could be either formal or informal. However, perhaps more significantly, it is also clear that all three gatherings tried to bring to life the ideal occasions, which Seino nowe had proposed in the late 18th century.

Gatherings for tea

The most famous gatherings in the region were the exhibitions of recent calligraphy and painting (Higo-hōmyō shiho tennen) held from the fourth year of Kansei (1792) to the first year of Meiji (1868). 22 Temples were among the preferred settings cited in Setsumon chosō. Manyaya Shōami, on the hill of Higashiyama, was sandwiched between two gardens, a higher and a lower one. 23 This enabled the visitors to enjoy two different garden views. The architectural uniqueness of the venue also shaped the choices made for the gathering. At the beginning of the record, Genzui mentions that the room for the gathering had no walls (presumably to enable participants to enjoy the garden views) so that no hanging scrolls were displayed. 24 The document describes the objects that were used at the gathering, their material, design, maker, and provenance, as well as the way of serving. Genzui and Baiitsu strongly favoured things Chinese for their displays for sencha. The majority of utensils in Genzui’s record were, in fact, made in China. 25 For example, there was a brazer made of white clay with three peaks and the inscription of “pulling and moving wind and crossing a forest”, which is a well-known type of Chinese brazer in Japan. 26 There was also a teapot made in the famous Yixing kiln in southern China with an inscription by Marshung, a well-known Harusho literatus highly reputed for his engraved poems on Yixing ware. 27 However, Japanese items also appeared in the record, for instance a Japanese lacquenware water container originating from Saijūji temple in Nara, which was treasured by the prominent literatus Kinara Kenkō (1736–1802), and subsequently by Chikuden and Genzui himself. 28 Genzui also ordered tea scoops made from bamboo and paper for the members of the tea society to which he belonged. 29 The record includes information about the utensils used for serving sweets. Hoshiro, or Asian hazels were served in a lacquered bowl. 30 Steamed yam cakes were served with syrup on a tray with a design of Camellia Sasanqua and Prunus. 31 Correspondingly, Camellia Sasanqua and Prunus were displayed in a bronze vase.

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As we have seen in Chinzan’s painting, tea utensils were not only used but also appreciated and discussed. Moreover, they were often the result of an interplay between users and creators, who interacted in various contexts. As early as the Kansei era (1787–1789), Kiyomizu Rokubei (1738–1789), the Kyoto potter, actively produced domestic steeped tea utensils. According to Chikuden’s Detailed records before and after the 12th year of Bunsei (Toseki sasaroku, 1829–1831), two important scholars and poets of the Edo period, Ueda Akinari (1734–1809) and Murase Kōtei (1746–1818) commissioned utensils from Rokubei based on their specifications.

Initially, Chinese products were favored, but gradually Japanese artists created their own unique works inspired by Chinese prototypes. Multiple inspirational sources – ceramics, poems and paintings – were often synthesised to create sencha utensils. For example, Aoki Mokubei (1767–1833), potter and painter, applied Chinese tea poems to the surface of rōro (earthenware braziers to boil water) as well as to stoneware and porcelain cups (fig. 8). The form of the small cups with a high foot ring follows the Chinese original produced in Jingdezhen. However, he created his own lively rhythm on a set of five cups freely articulating the size and style of characters in his rendering of the famous Tang poet, Lu Tong’s (790–835) tea poem.3 The making of these utensils is itself an expression of the literati spirit, and is seamlessly connected to what a sencha gathering was aiming for. Artists from various fields initiated the collaborative creation of their own tea utensils, each contributor following his own taste as well as his own expertise. Working with potters and woodturners, Chikuden inscribed characters and images on the surface of vessels (fig. 9). These utensils were used for sencha and viewed by invitees.

The preparation of his displays started with the planning and making of objects. Strangely shaped stones were among the preferred objects for sencha display and were often depicted by literati artists. Interesting stones were very much part of the Chinese literati tradition, but Japanese artists added their personal memories to the Chinese motif. The great haiku poet and painter Yosa Buson (1716–1783) depicted strangely shaped stones on a screen (fig. 10). The stones were not Chinese: they belong to the famous landscape motifs of Mt. Fuji.
at Wakanoura in Köhög, which has been admired since the Nara period. In the third year of Tempō (1832), Chikuden also sketched and documented a strangely shaped rock from Dannoura, which his pupil Hoashi Kyōhō (1810–1884) picked up. The stone was later gifted to Genzui, who, after Chikuden’s death, wrote an afterword to his Album of brush and ink reflections (Kanboku zuishin jō), which included the painting of the stone. This example indicates that an object for display could also be taken from nature and exchanged among peers. Genzui must have cherished this album for the history of the stone and the memory of his friend.

An interest in natural things was an important element of literati culture. Utensils made in the late Edo period also reflected such scholarly interest. Hōzan, a Kyoto potter, created a Chinese-style ewer but with a stone on the top of the lid (figs 11 a and b). The combination of natural and man-made objects, which is one of the characteristics of sencha display, can thus be seen within a single vessel. As can be expected, most of the plants that were used for display have not survived. However, surviving ceramic works tell us how important plants were for sencha practitioners. For example, Jwasaki Ō, a sencha friend of Genzui who lived in Ōmi province, commissioned Mokubei to create a blue and white pot for a plant, which is now held in Idemitsu Museum of Art (fig. 12). In the 7th year of Bunsei (1824), Genji (Uekiya) Kinta proudly published Šōmoku kihin kagami (Catalogue of extraordinary plants). This astonishing publication features about 500 strange plants and thus testifies to the fascination for plants of the time. Kinta, a gardener from Edo, interviewed around 60 collectors of strange plants and asked famous painters to record their collections. This work also demonstrates the demand for pots to contain the valuable plants. While pots from Hizen and Owari were preferred, there is an image of a Dutch pot in Kinta’s catalogue. Unfortunately, the fascination for strange plants and unique pots was considered undesirable in the context of the sumptuary policy of the Tempō reforms. Kinta was banished from Edo, his property was confiscated, and the printing blocks were burned. The history of Kinta’s book suggests one reason why no major works about the display of sencha were published towards the end of the Edo period.

**Conclusion**

The display for sencha in the late Edo period was the result of the interaction of objects and participants. It aimed to create both active and calm moments, not only for social gatherings but also as part of a scholar’s daily life. The objects were essential to creating a display, but a display could also be the starting point for the creation of objects as products of scholars’ activities. The display for sencha in the late Edo period combined China and Japan, old and new, artificial and natural, ideal and reality. It served to bring to life each scholar’s Utopia through tangible and intangible art.

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NOTES

1 Osaka Yomiuri Service, *Ingen zenshū to Uboku bunka no miryoku*, Osaka Yomiuri Service, Osaka 2011, p. 61, plate 38. The teapot is on loan to the Kyoto National Museum.


3 Jōchi Mariko, ‘Muromachi suiboku-ga no sencha – Bunjinga zoku no megoto’, in: Nomura Bijuutsukan kenkyû kiyô, vol. 16, 2007, pp. 54–81. The medical and spiritual benefit of tea was highly praised in poems from the Tang, Song and Ming dynasties in China, and in Japan. It was recited by Buddhist monks in the so-called Gozen bungaku or Five Mountain Literature. See also Otsuki Miki, *Sencha bunkô: Bunjinga no keizu*, Shibukawaku Shuppan, Kyoto 2004.


8 Ōeda in Hayashiya et al. (eds), op. cit. (1972), pp. 17–34.

9 The interpretation of the text follows Hayashiya Tatsusaburô’s annotations for *Seiwan chowa* in Hayashiya et al. (eds), op. cit. (1972), pp. 113–114.


12 Hayashiya et al. (eds), op. cit. (1972), p. 224.


14 Yamamoto Baisaitô, op. cit. (1908). The editors of Seigojû’s annotations for Bunjinga kenkyûkai’s [Research group for literary painting], provide interpretations of the metaphoric meanings behind the display images. Yamamoto Baisaitô, op. cit. (1908), pp. 25.


32 Funasaka, op. cit. (2007), pp. 107, 115–117. Shunken, a famous literary painter of the time, improved the way of hincha, which is a kind of game involving commenting on the taste of different types of steeped tea and guessing the ‘brand’ name of the tea leaves.


37 Tsubaki Chinzan, op. cit. (1838).


40 In Tanomura Chikuden, *Album of brush and ink reflections*, ink and light colours on paper, the third year of Bunsei (1823), 23.5 x 15.5 cm, now in the Museum Yamato Bunkakan.

41 Kôno Motoo (ed.), *Bunjingo 2: Gyokuddo, Chikuden, Besianjin, Edō meisaku gaô jenshû*, Shinshîdô, Tokyo 1994, pp. 58, 174. Genzui’s afterword was written in the sixth year of Tempô (1835).


