CHAPTER 2

INVENTING THE NATION: JAPANESE CULTURE POLITICIZES NATURE

... begin by posing the problem of national identity itself, to ask how it might be analysed and what importance communication practices might have in its constitution.¹

Cultural texts do not simply reflect history, they make history and are part of its processes and practices and should, therefore, be studied for the (ideological) work that they do, rather than the (ideological) work (always happening elsewhere) that they reflect.²

Imperialism seems to increasingly work through play; such play therefore needs to be taken very seriously.³

Introduction

The fictionalized account of a Hakata tea gathering points towards the social pleasures of tea play at a particular moment of seasonal change. We have also seen how Japanese literature can be used in tea-rooms to express the impermanence of nature and human life. According to the Nampo roku, Sen no Rikyū (1522–91) considered that the short lives of flowers were being misunderstood because of shortcomings in our awareness: ‘People in the world of society spend their time wondering when blossoms will open on this hillside or in that grove, day and night turning all their attention beyond themselves and never realizing that those blossoms and leaves lie within their own
hearts and minds.' More recent accounts of the importance of displaying tea-room flowers at the peak of their natural life force emphasize a temporal paradox. Ephemeral flowers are ‘symbols of eternity, but of an eternity that cannot express itself otherwise than in a moment. Through their complete silence, they communicate to us what is eternal.’

This tension between a delicate instant and that which is unchanging is visible in the relationship between the lives of individual citizens and the mythology of nationhood which claims for itself an existence beyond time. The early modern application of flowers as a political imperative is a major thematic concern of later chapters.

All flowers are not created equal: tea practitioners show little enthusiasm for flowers that remain in bloom for a long time. One foundation of tea culture is a nuanced sensitivity to the seasons that intensifies the calibration of annual cycles celebrated by various literary forms. Teaching institutions of the early twentieth century formed the category of Japanese literature, transmitting a concept of nature as transient. The ideological work performed by certain interpretations of classical Japanese literature became part of a particular worldview that encouraged individual sacrifice as the highest service to the state. Being aware of this politicized version of nature will be useful later when we examine how national cinema comments on the role of tea in the exercise of state power.

We are concerned with how the idea of transience that was sustained by tea practices and literary genres became allied with a belief in Japaneseessness. Our primary focus is how early modern interpretations of literature helped shape Japan as the community of unnatural death in the 1940s. The second point to be developed relates to national needs that demanded visual culture function as propaganda: the wartime strengthening of the commitment of citizens by Japanese culture depended on importing genres from Western painting traditions. It is in the context of these literary and visual cultures that the political appropriation of the legacy of Sen no Rikyū from the Meiji period (1868–1912) onwards is examined. This brief survey of early modern tea includes comments on the grand master model of tea transmission.