The national essence is, however, by no means fixed in the past, but subject to recurrent reinterpretation.¹

*Rikyū as representative: tea as national pride*

The recent work of Tanaka Hidetaka (b. 1958) offers important insights into changes in the popular perception of Sen no Rikyū.² The Japanese media was a significant element in both the wartime positioning of Rikyū as the embodiment of the highest values of the Way of Tea and the resulting perception that Rikyū’s Way of Tea was a worthy representative of Japanese culture. The three Senke tea schools used the opportunity of the two thousand and six hundredth anniversary of the establishment of the imperial line to amplify interest in the historical figure of Rikyū.

It is important for our later examination of how the Hideyoshi-Rikyū relationship is represented in two 1989 films to follow Tanaka’s calibration of shifts in popular reactions to Hideyoshi. The image of Hideyoshi as the political ruler who could not comprehend the tea of Rikyū appears to be a relatively modern invention. Large-scale tea gatherings organized around the figures of Hideyoshi and Rikyū helped shape popular perceptions of these men.
After the defeat of Toyotomi Hideyoshi by Tokugawa Ieyasu, the destruction of Hōkoku Shrine in Kyōto was ordered. By 1744, the year of the hundred and fiftieth commemoration of the death of Hideyoshi, his grave was overgrown by grass. However the tale of Hideyoshi rising from peasant stock to be the First Under Heaven embodied the dreams of Edo period commoners enduring the rigours of Tokugawa legislation. In 1868, the Meiji Emperor recognized this popular adulation and ordered the rehabilitation of Hōkoku Shrine. By 1880, the god-spirit of Hideyoshi was installed in the Hōkoku Shrine of Kyōto and Osaka. In 1898 exuberant festivities marking the passing of 300 years from the death of Hideyoshi rapidly expanded.

Kyōto assumed the colour of the Kampaku Hideyoshi in a festival that ran from 1 April to 31 May 1898. From 18 April to 20 April 1898 there was one kencha ceremony a day and a large-scale public tea gathering ran for those three days. The following attendance figures give a clear indication of the contagious popularity of Hideyoshi, although Tanaka notes that the early modern image of Hideyoshi enjoying tea was already established in 1886 by the three hundredth commemoration of the 1587 Kitano Ōhanoyu. On 18 April 1898, when the kencha ceremony was performed by the Omotesenke school, 300 people attended. On 19 April, when the kencha ceremony was performed by the Yabunouchi school, 1,500 people attended. On 20 April, when the kencha ceremony was performed by Urasenke school, 10,500 people attended.

Reconciling this early modern level of popular interest linking Hideyoshi and tea with more recent accounts of his status as the tyrant warlord who effectively murdered Rikyū highlights the extent to which the Rikyū narrative has been reconfigured. Although this positioning of Rikyū was not solely achieved by the Senke grand masters, they remain the principal beneficiaries of Rikyū representing tea and wartime Japanese culture.

It should be noted that the Senke grand masters were actively involved with the 1936 Shōwa Kitano Ōhanoyu and the 1940 Rikyū 350 Nenki Ōchakai. In the same way that Rikyū was one of the tea masters serving tea at the 1587 Kitano Ōhanoyu organized by Hideyoshi, the Senke grand masters were members of the organizing committees, public performers of advanced tea procedures and speakers at commemorative lectures at both of these major tea gather-