

# ***The Relationship Between Tea Bowls and the Construction of the Political Authority of Japan in the Azuchi–Momoyama Period***

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**Abstract.** This paper discusses the connection between tea bowls and political authority under the influence of the two most significant rulers during the Azuchi–Momoyama period (1568-1603), Oda Nobunaga and Toyotomi Hideyoshi. It aims to comprehensively study what kinds of political messages were attached to tea bowls and how they were formed and associated, while understanding how they contributed to the construction of political authority. This paper argues that although the period as a whole saw the entanglement between tea bowls and political authority, this relationship was not singular but complicated and behaved differently under each ruler. On the one hand, Nobunaga built his expression of political authority to elites upon the possession, submission and gifting of traditionally recognised tea bowls. On the other hand, Hideyoshi presented his authority beyond the elites to commoners and the royals. This was achieved by spreading tea culture, using cheaper tea bowls to gain recognition as a cultural leader, while still exercising the relationship between the luxury tea bowls and power.

**Keywords:** Tea bowls, Oda Nobunaga, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, Political Authority

## **1. Introduction**

During the Azuchi-Momoyama period, politically motivated tea ceremonies were a significant theme of the tea culture. Under the influence of the two rulers of this period, Oda Nobunaga (1534-1582) and Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537-1598), the meaning of tea bowls and their artistic presentation were closely associated with different forms of political expression. The contemporary research have been focusing more on the cultural aspect of tea bowls and their relationship with Nobunaga and Hideyoshi separately. However, there are not as many work that comprehensively discuss the connection and differences between tea bowls' political meaning under these two rulers. Thus, this paper aims to investigate how tea bowls were used and regarded by these rulers in a more connected perspective to understand how the different forms of connections between the tea bowls and political authority worked and related to each other.

This study is conducted through understanding the implications of political activities of Nobunaga and Hideyoshi that involved tea bowls. Such analysis will be done through breaking down the characteristics of Nobunaga's association of traditionally recognised luxury tea bowls in

his expression of authority. Furthermore, Hideyoshi's attempt to reinforce his political power through different uses of tea bowls for various audiences is also studied as a contrast. From these studies, this paper hopes to look into the complexity and enrich the understanding of the entanglement between tea bowls and politics under Nobunaga and Hideyoshi.

## **2. Oda Nobunaga: tea bowls as symbols of political authority**

The relationship between tea bowls and the construction of political authority under Oda Nobunaga was characterised by his use of the prestige and economic value of traditionally recognised tea utensils. He actively attempted to reinforce this relationship through a series of political activities, such as the “hunt for famous objects” [1]. His use of tea bowls in political authority was also marked by the extension of this relation about possession and power, such as submission and gifting of tea bowls.

### **2.1. The “hunt for famous objects”: demonstration of political domination**

Nobunaga's political use of tea bowls is perhaps most vividly illustrated in his so-called “hunt for famous objects.” The Chronicle of Lord Nobunaga described it as collecting the Chinese and famous objects in Japan [2]. This suggests that the political authority is attached to the prestige or economic value of the tea bowls or other artworks. Scholars such as Zhang also argued that Nobunaga valued the prestige from the recognised tea bowls, as they can be seen as symbols of status [3]. Examples of Nobunaga's collection, like the Fuji-nasu tea bowl, supported this argument. As a Chinese tea bowl, which was regarded as precious, its possession can demonstrate both Nobunaga's economic and political capability.

Moreover, the prestige of the tea bowls also came from the previous Ashikaga shogunate's tradition of collecting famous artworks. Being able to possess tea bowls like Hatsuana-katatsuki that were owned by the Ashikaga rulers constructed a connection between the Ashikaga prestige and Nobunaga's authority, which strengthened the implied legitimacy and political power. Historian Takeshi Watanabe also emphasised that the political connection between being the ruler and the owner of the famous tea bowls was shared between the Ashikaga and Nobunaga authorities [4].

Overall, under Nobunaga, the political prestige and the economic value of the tea bowls were attached to his personal capability of possessing them. Thus, it was mainly the traditionally recognised tea bowls that were connected to the political authority during this period.

### **2.2. Submission of tea bowls: gestures of subordination**

Under Nobunaga's “hunt for famous objects” event, daimyos and other influential figures expressed their subordination by submitting famous artworks, including tea bowls. As the political power was attached to famous tea bowls, submitting them to Nobunaga started to be connected with the idea of submitting authority [5]. The case of Matsunaga Hisahide is particularly telling: after rebelling against Nobunaga, he regained pardoned by submitting tea bowls [3]. Similarly, following the defeat of Imagawa Yoshimoto in 1560, his son offered artworks to Nobunaga as a sign of surrender. These examples show that the symbolic transfer of traditionally valued tea bowls could function as a ritual of political submission.

Nevertheless, the relationship between the submission of tea bowls by merchant elites and political subordination is not as direct. The merchant elites in the Sakai region are a great example, as they had significant social influence with a great level of autonomy. The division among

historians such as Surak and Huang shows the complexity of it. Unlike Huang, who believed that the submission was a direct sign of subordination, Surak argued that Nobunaga's interests in tea bowls had a purpose of emulating courtly refinement and winning over merchant elites whose resources were vital for military campaigns [5, 6]. As the merchant elites in the 16th century embraced tea culture as a way to demonstrate their cultural superiority among the commoners, such interest in tea bowls is a recognition of their status. Their submission of tea bowls to Nobunaga was merely a part of the social networking of this cooperation instead of subordination [6].

While agreeing with Surak's description of cooperation, this paper argues that the event of submission itself was still a sign of subordination. The Chronicle of Lord Nobunaga recorded that a list of artworks, including tea bowls, was directly summoned after Nobunaga noticed the Sakai merchant elites' possession of them in 1570 [2]. This coercive dimension reveals a gesture of exerting authority and the merchant elites' subordination to it, instead of social networking. It is coherent with the idea that submission of famous tea bowls represented the transfer of possession and thus the authority attached to it, as explained in the previous section. As the source was written by Ōta Gyūichi, a vassal of Nobunaga, it is relatively reliable because his job was close enough to Nobunaga to understand the details. Also, the source is not likely to exaggerate information, as it was written in 1958 after Nobunaga's death. Therefore, a significant feature of the relationship between tea bowls and political authority under Nobunaga was that concrete bowls were attached to a mark of subordination, derived from the political authority signified by their possession.

### 2.3. Gifting tea bowls: political support and political hierarchy

Another extension of the political meaning associated with the possession of tea bowls is the gifting of them to Nobunaga's followers as rewards. This event, along with the permission to hold tea ceremonies, is referred to as the "governance by tea." Through gifting tea bowls, which carried a sense of political power, Nobunaga demonstrated support and reinforced the political hierarchy by placing these followers symbolically above the others, while implying his overall authority.

For example, he gave Niwa Nagahide a Chinese celadon bowl as a reward for his work on Azuchi Castle [7]. As a figure who played a crucial role in the rise of Nobunaga, this action agrees with the idea that gifting tea bowls was a symbolic recognition of one's political status. It is further supported by the statements of many who received tea bowls: "their ability to acquire such precious items was, they knew, a reflection of their lord's power and his glory" [7]. Here, the statements demonstrated the implication of Nobunaga's political authority and support in the "governance by tea." Hence, concrete tea bowls were connected to political support and hierarchy symbols.

Moreover, by permitting them to host tea ceremonies, he indirectly gifted the ability to display these gifts to his followers. Thus, these followers were placed at a higher political hierarchy by being able to show their political power. This emphasis on hierarchy strengthened political stability under Nobunaga's regime. Hideyoshi's attitude to this event supports this argument. He recalled this privilege as an honour unforgettable in this life when he was a follower of Nobunaga [3]. Such gratitude reflected the political weight that was carried by being gifted and being permitted to present the tea bowls. Thus, through the "governance by tea," people who received the gifts not only received symbolic support and recognition through tea bowls but also gained political authority under Nobunaga by having the ability to present them. Hence, concrete tea bowls were used by Nobunaga as political symbols to express support and reinforce political stability, which helped in the construction of Nobunaga's political authority as a whole.

### 3. Toyotomi Hideyoshi: tea bowls, cultural leader, and ruler of the realm

In contrast to Nobunaga's emphasis on the possession and redistribution of tea bowls, Toyotomi Hideyoshi took a more abstract approach in associating tea bowls with political authority. He used the secularisation of cheaper tea bowls as a way to construct a wide range of recognition of tea culture among the commoners. Such recognition expanded his image as the leader of tea culture among commoners, which established a stable authority culturally. At the same time, he preserved Nobunaga's approach to connecting political power with the possession of tea bowls and emphasised this message through flaunting them in tea gatherings, even to the emperor. Both the construction of a cultural leader and the expression of political authority served to reinforce his overall picture as the ruler of the realm.

#### 3.1. Broadening tea participation as a basis for political authority

Hideyoshi supported cheaper tea bowls to expand the tea culture among the commoners, which was part of the construction of his cultural leadership and political authority. Although it is unfair to say that he fully appreciated this type of tea bowl, like Wabicha, evidence like the Grand Kitano Tea Ceremony in 1587 can confirm a degree of support. Hideyoshi emphasised that peasants with any form of tea bowls were able to join the ceremony as long as they were interested in tea culture [8]. This sense of cheap, imperfect and secularised tea bowls matches the Wabicha ideology of Sen no Rikyo, Hideyoshi's tea advisor, whether or not this was an intentional construction of the school of Wabicha [9, 10]. In this context, the Wabicha ideology refers to the preference of simple, plain and imperfect styles of tea bowls. By exercising such ideology, it lowered the requirements to join the ceremony [11]. This supports the idea that Hideyoshi aimed to use the spread of tea bowls as a tool to expand the audience of tea culture to commoners. Through this, commoners were connected to this cultural recognition. Hideyoshi's other regulations on that ceremony also support this idea. For example, by stating that participants were not required to have proper tea to join the ceremony, Hideyoshi removed the traditional importance of high-quality tea in the tea culture, which also expanded the tea culture from the upper class into commoners.

Hideyoshi then used this expanding recognition of tea culture to support his role as a cultural leader and authority in general. By stating that if one did not attend this ceremony, they would be prohibited from any tea events, Hideyoshi sent a message of monopoly over the tea culture [9]. This power of ordering tea ceremonies is a construction of cultural hierarchy and placed Hideyoshi at the top of it, which contributed to the stability and authority of his role as the ruler of the realm [3]. For people who joined the tea culture through Hideyoshi's secularised form of tea bowls, as they were previously economically incapable of using the luxurious ones, they symbolically acknowledged Hideyoshi's regulation and thus recognised his role as the leader of tea culture.

Thus, the significant increase in participation among the commoners through his support of cheaper tea bowls strengthened the scale of Hideyoshi's cultural authority and extended this power among the commoners. Hideyoshi further extended the use of tea bowls and their attraction to commoners to construct his political authority. Although this ceremony was held in Kyoto, there were not a great number of Kyoto tea masters in the ceremony [9]. This significantly challenged the cultural authority of Kyoto, the representation of the Emperor. [9] It is implied that, for commoners who recognised tea culture, Hideyoshi, who supported the cheaper tea bowls, had a greater cultural authority than the emperor. Thus, this essay argues that the relationship between tea bowls and political authority under Hideyoshi was more abstract. He used cheaper tea bowls as a tool to

integrate more commoners into the recognition of him as the cultural leader that he constructed through various actions, which ultimately strengthened his authority as the ruler of the realm.

### 3.2. Inheriting the authority of luxury tea bowls

Concurrently, Hideyoshi did not abandon the prestige political authority attached to luxury tea bowls. Unlike Nobunaga, who also focused on the transfer of possession as a sign of political authority, Hideyoshi mainly emphasised the possession and presentation of expensive tea bowls. For instance, in the Grand Kitano Tea Ceremony, he placed his gold-plated tea room at the centre while presenting his tea bowl collection in it. The purpose of demonstrating his political power was expressed through flaunting. The recorded sign of the ceremony supports this idea by saying Hideyoshi collected all the famous artworks and would present them in the ceremony [3]. Example exhibits like the 40 koku jar, which was praised by Ashikaga Yoshimasa and known as the finest jar in the realm, demonstrated how Hideyoshi still used the prestige and value of traditionally recognised tea bowls as a symbol of authority [12].

Furthermore, the connection between flaunting the possession of luxury tea bowls and political authority can also be seen in the context of this ceremony. Apart from the political purposes discussed above, this ceremony was held directly after Hideyoshi's success in the Kyūshū campaign of 1586-87. As a celebration of his military success, the connection between political power and presenting luxury tea bowls is demonstrated [9]. At the same time, Hideyoshi expressed his political authority by presenting his tea bowls in front of the emperor while forcing the emperor to participate in the ceremony to see them at the Imperial Palace Tea Gathering in 1585. Again, as this gathering was held to celebrate Hideyoshi assuming the kanpaku (imperial regent), the relationship between the presentation of luxury tea bowls and the symbol of power is demonstrated [13]. Records suggest that the participation of the emperor in this gathering was only achieved through Hideyoshi's strong will [3]. The fact that he forced the emperor to join the ceremony and witness this flaunting of tea bowls further supports the idea that Hideyoshi expressed his authority through luxury tea bowls. Hence, under Hideyoshi, the possession and presentation of luxury tea bowls still carried the message of political authority.

## 4. Conclusion

The relationship between tea bowls and the construction of the political authority in the Azuchi–Momoyama period was close and multi-dimensional. Nobunaga and Hideyoshi both developed this relationship and demonstrated different but not fully distinct uses of tea bowls to express their political power.

For Nobunaga, the political authority was centred around the prestige and economic value of traditionally recognised luxury tea bowls. The possession of them was used to display his political and economic capability. This further extended into the connection between symbolic subordination and the construction of political hierarchy, and the submission and gifting of tea bowls, respectively.

In contrast, Hideyoshi embraced two different relationships between tea bowls and political authority. While his use of luxury tea bowls as an expression of power demonstrated a clear connection with Nobunaga's ideology, his use of Wabicha ideology and cheaper tea bowls was very distinct. Instead of attaching political meaning to concrete tea bowls, his use of cheap tea bowls' attraction to commoners was much more abstract. Hideyoshi developed a chain of strategies that linked tea bowls to the construction of his imagery as a cultural leader and to strengthen his overall authority. Furthermore, it is possible to say that under Nobunaga, the audience of the political

message associated with tea bowls was mainly limited to elites, but Hideyoshi's expression of authority from tea bowls was much wider, as it extended significantly into the commoners and the royal. Hence, this essay emphasises that tea bowls and political authority had a changing relationship during this period, and it is unfair to treat them as a single phenomenon.

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