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JOÃO RODRIGUES (1562-1633), the Interpreter.

Title page of Arte da Lingoa de Iapam, by João Rodrigues S. J.; although it bears the date 1604, the work was not published until 1608. This was the first systematic study of the Japanese language to be published. Bodleian Library, Oxford: Arch.B d.14. (The Southern Barbarians, Plate 55)

If Frois was the chronicler of stirring events and Cocks the recorder of daily life, Joao Rodrigues was par excellence the exponent of Japanese language and culture. Few of his contemporaries from Europe paid much attention to Japanese culture, and even fewer had either the opportunity or the inclination to study it deeply. Rodrigues not only wrote on the subject with enthusiasm, but showed an appreciation and insight seldom attained by a Westerner either in his time or our own.

Joao Rodrigues was born about 1562 at Sernancelhe in northern Portugal and sailed to the East while still a boy of twelve or thirteen years of age. He entered the Jesuit Order in Japan and obtained such a proficiency in Japanese that he acted as Valignano's interpreter at the audience granted by Hideyoshi in 1591. From that date onwards he made frequent visits to court, acting as spokesman for the Jesuit missionaries and interpreter for the delegations of Portuguese merchants. After Hideyoshi's death in 1598, Tokugawa Ieyasu continued to favor him and even appointed him as his commercial agent in Nagasaki. Jealousy and resentment on the part of local officials resulted in his exile to Macao in

1610 after living in Japan for thirty-three years, during which time he met many of the leading political and artistic figures of the day.

Rodrigues spent the rest of his life in Macao, from where he made several journeys into the interior of China in order to study the esoteric doctrines of Buddhism. In 1628 he accompanied a military expedition to Peking, and was probably the first European to visit the capitals of both China and Japan. Then, after various colorful adventures, including a dramatic escape from a besieged fort at dead of night, he was formally commended for his services by the Chinese court.

But Rodrigues' claim to fame is based on something far more substantial and durable than these spectacular feats. In addition to his business activities in Japan he found time to publish at Nagasaki in 1608 the Arte da Lingoa de lapam, a truly monumental work, for it was the first systematic grammar of the Japanese language. Not only does he describe the spoken and written language in exhaustive and possibly excessive detail, but he includes for good measure fascinating accounts of Japanese poetry, letter writing, and history. Unlike Frois, Rodrigues did not write a large number of letters and had little or nothing to say about contemporary events. But following the example of Frois, he planned to write a history of the Japanese mission, and the two introductory books of this uncompleted work contain most of his discerning observations on Japanese culture. Rodrigues' literary style and presentation may lack the elegance and method of Frois; but whereas the chronicler was generally content to report the events of Japan and seldom allowed himself the luxury of delving beneath the surface, Rodrigues probed deeper and tried to explain the ethos of Japanese culture. It is in his account of Japanese art that he displays his outstanding talent, and his description of the tea ceremony, flower arrangement, painting, lacquerwork and calligraphy is unrivaled in contemporary European reports. His appreciation of the

Japanese artistic temperament is remarkable, and he accurately and sympathetically portrays the elusive feeling of sabi, the transcendental loneliness of the homo viator in this fleeting world of dew, and the sentiment of wabi, the spirit of disciplined and aesthetic frugality in art and life. Rodrigues was well acquainted with the magnificent palaces and mansions of Kyoto and Sakai, and he sets down his recollections of their interior decoration.

The walls are lined with paintings executed on many layers of paper like thick parchment, and they are excellently decorated with trees, rivers, springs, animals, birds, lakes, seas, ships, human figures, and scenes from ancient legends, some of them containing soldiers, according to individual taste. Or the four seasons of the year may be represented, each one depicted by whatever blooms in that season. In the part representing spring there will be various kinds of flowers that bloom therein, mist, clouds and other things proper to that time of year. For summer there will be other flowers that bloom in that season and green fruit about to ripen. The autumn season will depict ripe fruit, the leaves of the trees losing their color and falling to the ground, and fields of ripe rice being harvested. In winter there will be the dry leafless trees, for their vitality leaves the branches and gathers in the roots; there will also be snow, and the birds of that season, such as wild duck, cranes, swans and others, which come flying in flocks from Tartary with their leader in front, and other birds moving through the fields. Everything is done to imitate nature so that you seem to be looking at the very things themselves. In the houses of the great lords and nobles these paintings and the doors of the rooms have a background richly painted in gold, and on this gold they depict the scenes in various suitable colors.

But after describing the splendors of such paintings, which reached their highest form in the contemporary Kano school, Rodrigues notes that

"the Japanese are fond of melancholy subjects and colors rather than happy ones, and they seek contemplation and nostalgia in everything For in addition to the magnificent scenes in gold,

They also depict hermitages of recluses dwelling in the wilderness, as well as valleys, forests, rivers, lakes and seas with boats sailing in the distance. There are eight famous lonely places, called hakkei or "eight views," both in Japanese and Chinese tradition, and these scenes are often painted and much admired. The first scene is a certain famous place with the clear autumn moon reflected in the water; they go out on autumn nights to gaze at the moon in a sad, nostalgic mood. The second view is of a valley or remote wilderness where a hermitage bell, rung at sunset or at night, is heard sounding softly from afar. Third, rain falling quietly at night in a certain lonely spot. Fourth, a ship sailing back frorn the distant high seas toward the land. Fifth, the sight of a lovely fair in certain mountains. Sixth, fishing boats returning together from the sea at sunset. Seventh, flocks of wild birds landing with their leader in a certain place. Eighth, snow falling on a high place in the evening or during the night. All this is in keeping with their temperament and makes them feel very nostalgic and quietly lonely.

In Rodrigues' opinion, Japanese culture reaches its finest development in suki, the gathering of friends to drink tea, and he devotes no less than five chapters to describing the setting and procedure of this aesthetic pastime. He rightly attributes its inspiration to the monks of the Zen sect; and while showing scant sympathy for the degenerate conduct of many of the Buddhist monks during that period of monastic decline, he admires the dynamic Zen spirit, which has left its imprint on practically every aspect of Japanese culture. He outlines with obvious approval the Zen ideal. This art of suki, then, is a kind of solitary religion instituted to encourage good customs and moderation. This is in imitation of the hermit

philosophers of the Zen sect who dwell in their lonely retreats. Their vocation is not to philosophize with the help of books and treatises written by illustrious masters and doctors, as do the members of other sects.

Instead, they give themselves up to conternplating the things of nature, despising and abandoning worldly things. They rnortify their passions by means of certain enigmatic and figurative meditations and considerations. Thus from what they see in things themselves they attain by their own efforts to a knowledge of the First Cause; their soul and intellect put aside everything evil and imperfect until they reach the natural perfection and being of the First Cause. Such an ascetical training, says Rodrigues, forrns "a resolute and determined character, "without any slackness, indolence, mediocrity or effeminacy." This is a far cry from the sweep- ing condemnation of Buddhist monks in the accounts of other Europeans of that time. In a desire to savor the harmony of nature, every man of means possesses a small tea house within the grounds of his mansion. Great care and expense are lavished to make the setting appear as natural as possible, for unlike European gardens with their symmetrical and artificial design, those in Japan are planned to blend and harmonize with nature. They search in remote areas for a special type of tree of certain fashion and shape to plant in the garden, for any tree whatsoever will not do. This costs a great deal of money until the trees take root and look as if they had sprung up there quite naturally. The stones with which they pave the path make up one of the main expenses; they are of a certain kind and are sought for in distant places. Although rough and unworked, they look as if they have appeared there quite naturally, and they have a certain grace, beauty and simplicity about them. They buy choice stones at a high price, and among them will be a special one containing a pool of water within a cavity in the rough stone for washing the hands. Suitable ones are found only seldom and are worth a great deal. Rodrigues enlarges on this

subject and goes on to explain the peculiar attraction of Japanese gardens. Everything artificial, refined and pretty rnust be avoided, for anything not made according to nature causes tedium and boredom in the long run. If you plant two trees of the same size and shape, one in front of the other, they will eventually cause tedium and boredom; the same applies to other things as well. But lack of artificiality and a certain note of naturalness (for example, a tree consisting of various disordered branches pointing this way and that, just as nature intended) is never boring, because experience shows that there is always something new to be found therein. But this cannot be said of artificial things, which look well only at first sight and eventually cause boredom and disgust. The tea house itself is far different from the gilded halls of Fushimi Castle, and Rodrigues, who had known some of the leading tea masters of the day, describes with great sympathy the ideal meeting place for this ritual.

This gathering for tea and conversation is not intended for lengthy talk among themselves, but rather to contemplate within their souls with all peace and modesty the things that they see there and thus through their own efforts to understand the mysteries locked therein. In keeping with this, everything used in this ceremony is as rustic, rough, completely unrefined and simple as nature made it, after the style of a solitary and rustic hermitage. Thus the house and the path leading to it, as w ell as all the utensils employed therein, are all of this kind. So they do not make use of spacious rooms and richly decorated apartments for this gathering as they do in normal social usage, nor do they use costly and delicate china dishes or other rich and choice vessels. Instead the desired effect is gained by a tiny cottage, thatched with straw and reeds, situated within the compound and next to the house in which they dwell. It is fashioned from timber as rough as it came from the forest and one old piece of wood is merely fixed to another. Everything is left in its natural state; there is no

artistry nor genteelness apparent, but only natural elegance and age. Thus from his exile in Macao the elderly missionary tries to express and explain the spirit of Japanese culture. When Valignano comments that a certain tea bowl, costing fourteen thousand ducats, was fit for nothing more than to serve as a water trough in a birdcage, Rodrigues points out its intrinsic beauty and value. When Matteo Ricci remarks that temple bells give out a note of poor quality because they are rung by a hanging log instead of a metal clapper, Rodrigues maintains, and surely rightly, that such bells emit an evocative and mellow sound precisely because of this arrangement.

Writing about the spirit of the tea ceremony, Rodrigues observes, Hence they have come to detest any kind of contrivance and elegance, any pretense, hypocrisy and outward embellishment, which they call keihaku in their language…

Instead, their ideal is to promise little but accomplish much; always to use moderation in everything; finally, to desire to err by default rather than by excess… The more precious the utensils are in themselves and the less they show it, the more suitable they are. It would be difficult to improve on this summary description of the traditional Japanese canon of taste. Written today by a Westerner, the passage would indicate a commendable under-standing and appreciation of an essentially alien culture; to have been written three and a half centuries ago reveals Joao Rodrigues as a unique interpreter not only of the language but also of the artistic genius of the Japanese people.

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