

TSUEN THE TEA PRIEST

(Tsuen)

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A tea priest named Tsuen died in the attempt to make enough tea to serve everyone present at the dedication ceremony for the Uji Bridge. His ghost appears to a wandering priest and tells the sad tale of his end in song and dance.

Ghost of Tsuen (Shite)

Traveling Priest (Waki)

Person of the Place (Ai)

PRIEST (Singing.)

In journey-weary rags, I wander on and on,

In journey-weary rags, I wander on and on,

Without even a coin for tea. How sad am I!

(Speaking.) I am a priest who wanders about from land to land. As I have never visited the Byodo Monastery of Uji before, I have just made up my mind to make a pilgrimage there. (Singing.)

In the wide river

Even horse chestnut hulls float high in the swift flow,

Even horse chestnut hulls float high in the swift flow,

Abandoning the flesh, we too gain celestial heights,

Thus I reject this world, seeking for higher things,

As I have pressed along my way with greatest haste,
It is under the pillars of the Uji Bridge with their
Onion blossom carvings, that I find I have arrived.

(Speaking.) As I have made my way with haste, I have now arrived at the Byodo Monastery of Uji. And seeing a tea house standing here, I find that an offering of tea has been made to the Buddha, but there is no tea priest about. I am certain that there must be some story behind this matter. I think that I will question some person of this place about it. Is there a person of this place about?

PERSON Who is it who calls out for a person of this place?

PRIEST Seeing this tea house standing here, I find that an offering of tea has been made to the Buddha, but there is no tea priest about. I thought that there must indeed be some story behind this, and I wish for you to tell it to me if there is.

PERSON I will do as you request. In the past, there was a tea priest in this place named Tsuen, but upon the occasion of the dedication ceremony for the Uji Bridge, he made so much tea that he died of the effort. Feeling pity for him, the people of this place always make offerings of tea on the anniversary of his death. As today is the true anniversary of the day he died, though you have no relationship with him that would place any obligation upon you to do so, please offer prayers for him before you continue on your way.

PRIEST I sincerely thank you for so kindly telling me his story. In that case, I will indeed offer prayers for him before I continue on my way.

PERSON If there is anything else you might require, do not hesitate to call on me.

PRIEST I will call on you indeed.

PERSON And I will respond, with all my heart.

PRIEST So this is the remains of the tea priest Tsuen.
(Singing.)

Now I will offer prayers for the repose of his soul.
I call to mind the haven inside this tea house,
I call to mind the haven inside this tea house,
Upon its rough floor, I spread my old straw matting,
lie down and cover myself with my tattered robe,
To await the encounter promised in dream,
To await the encounter promised in dream.

TSUEN (Singing.)

I brewed tea for such a multitude
That all present were deeply moved,
Using water drawn from this world's Uji River.
How I miss the taste of kelp and tea,
Mixed together by the tea master
In the sad and transient heat of the water.

CHORUS (Singing.)

Both the searingly hot teakettle handle,

TSUEN (Singing.)

And the boiling tea water

Are most amusing!

PRIEST (Singing.)

Oh, how very strange!

Glancing up from the pillow where I rest my sleepy head,

I see someone bearing a tea cup and a water dipper,

Standing before my eyes.

What sort of person is this who appears before me?

TSUEN (Singing.)

I am the one who died brewing tea

At the dedication ceremony of the Uji Bridge.

I am called Tsuen.

PRIEST So you are indeed that same Tsuen? Then tell me now the tale of your end, and I will offer prayers for your repose before I go on my way.

TSUEN If that is the case, I will tell you now the tale of my end, so do please offer prayers for my repose when I am done.

PRIEST That I will, with all my heart.

TSUEN (Speaking.) It happened about halfway through the dedication ceremony for the Uji Bridge. A group who appeared to be pilgrims from the capital gathered around to drink all the tea Tsuen had brewed. (Singing.)

Speaking their names, three hundred gathered, eagerly,

CHORUS (Singing.)

Speaking their names, three hundred gathered, eagerly,
Opening their mouths wide, they quickly drank up all the tea.

Determined to make enough tea to serve everyone there,
He scooped up with a ladle all tea on hand despite the quality,

Thrust it into his kettle where the tea leaves
Surfaced and sank in the boiling water.

TSUEN (Singing.)

Tsuen called his servants and told them to remember,

CHORUS (Singing.)

That sand is always present in swirling water,
So they should draw from smooth, still water,
And that the weak among them should carry the dippers,
While the strong ones should bear the water on their backs,
And passersby should be enlisted to bring him the tea whisks,
In this manner, he admonished all to work in harmony.

Thus it is thanks to the guidance of this one tea priest
That in spite of the enormous size of the crowd,
His persistence made it possible to serve tea to each one
there.

But when he set his whisks in a row,

And declared that he had brewed all the tea he could,
Everyone jostled each other, pressing forward,
All demanding just one more cup of tea.

TSUEN (Singing.)

Tsuen begged them to let him stop.

CHORUS (Singing.)

He smashed his teacup and his ladle on the ground,
Thinking to put an end to his life,

CHORUS (Singing.)

Thinking to put an end to his life,
'Neath the eaves of Byodo Monastery,
Upon a plot of sand in the garden,
He carefully laid down his fan,
Slowly took off his silk cloak,
And sat on the fan, clutched his tea whisk tightly in his hand,
Ending his life in a style befitting his name.

(TSUEN dances to instrumental accompaniment, or to vocal accompaniment that imitates the sound of the instruments.)

TSUEN (Singing.)

Never more will my buried embers
rise up in brilliant living flame,
Nor heat water any more,
Thus not even foam will rise up.

CHORUS (Singing.)

Please offer prayers for my soul's repose, oh, Sir Priest.

In spite of the transience

Of our former life karmic tea relationship.

Speaking thus the ghost slipped away

Beneath the shadow of the fan-shaped turf.

Vanishing from sight in a swirl of tea,

Leaving behind nothing but a bright swirl of tea.