

I've been practicing tea ceremony for about two and a half years now, and I know I've written about it several times. But it seems like as time goes on, my ideas about it change, so I'm going to write, yet again, about the big tea ceremony that we had last week. Every year, my tea ceremony teacher hosts a big "hatsugama" tea ceremony at the beginning of January. It's symbolic of the first time that we use the hearth in that year. This year, I thought I was going to miss the tea ceremony, because I was organizing the ski trip for Mie ALTs on the same weekend. Unfortunately, my tea ceremony teacher's husband broke his hip and the tea ceremony had to be postponed. While I felt sorry for the terrible strain on my teacher and her family, I was grateful that I could join the tea ceremony after all, rescheduled for a weekend in February.

When the tea ceremony was rescheduled and she learned I could go, my teacher asked me to be the shokyaku-san, or the first guest. I don't know how much everyone knows about tea ceremony, but this seemed like a very important role! The first guest traditionally does things like ask the host about the tools that she is using in the tea ceremony. I think that the first guest is also technically responsible for helping to start conversation with the other guests, and generally be like a leader for all the guests at the tea ceremony. It seemed like too big of a role for someone like me, who is still new to tea ceremony and speaking Japanese! I accepted the challenge anyway, because I was honored that my teacher asked me and I didn't want to disappoint her. I spent the weeks before the tea ceremony practicing all the formal Japanese that I had to use on that day, making sure that I had everything memorized even if I didn't know what it meant!

On that day, I went to my teacher's house early in the morning to help set up and get dressed in my kimono. But my teacher had prepared a beautiful grey silk kimono with poppies that once belonged to her daughter and asked me to wear it. It was probably the nicest thing I have ever worn. I had been so worried about the spotlight being on me that I hardly slept the night before. I knew all the people that would be there that day, but still I was nervous about making a mistake. I wanted to make my teacher proud! In the end, I remembered most of the words I had to say and only made a few mistakes. As I was watching all the ladies talking and laughing with each other during the ceremony, I realized that my role was not as important as I had worried it would be. I enjoyed seeing tea ceremony from a different point of view (I'm usually helping behind the scenes and making tea), and coming to understand the meaning of more of the spoken Japanese. I feel like I have been practicing tea ceremony for so long, but really, I have just begun and still have a LOT to learn!