

'Making a Transnational Design History in East Asia

Yen Shuilong's Craft-Design Movement'

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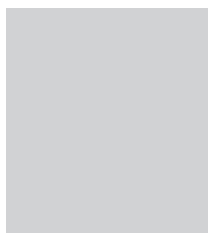
Yen Shuilong's Early Activities

My presentation is about a multi-talented artist and designer Yen Shuilong. (Fig. 1) Yen Shuilong (1903-97) was born in Taiwan within the 'Japanese Empire' but his life is dominated by what we would now call transnational activities. During the fifteen years since his death, there have been a number of retrospective exhibitions on him, and these have served to anchor his status in Taiwanese history of art and design. From last year through to this year the Taipei Fine Arts Museum organised an exhibition 'The Public Spirit, Beauty in the Making: Shui-Long Yen'. (Fig. 2) On the other hand in Japan, even though Yen was Japanese until 1945, he hasn't been well recognized, and it appears as though he may have been intentionally forgotten with the history of Japanese colonization.

Yen was born into a poor farming family in Tainan prefecture, but his talent for art was spotted while he was teaching at a local public school, and he was given a scholarship to study in Tokyo in 1920. He firstly went to the night school of Tokyo Seisoku Preparatory School (present Seisoku Gakuen High School) and Kawabata Institute of Western-style painting while working in daytime. Two years later in 1922 he entered the Tokyo School



1. Yen Shuilong
(Source: *Lanyu, Zhuangshi, Yen Shuilong*, Taipei: Lion Art Publisher, 1993, p. 81)



2. *The Public Spirit, Beauty in the Making Shui-Long Yen*, Taipei: Taipei Fine Arts Museum, 2012.

of Fine Arts. For the next seven years until he completed undergraduate study and postgraduate research in 1929, he studied painting under Fujishima Takeji, Okada Saburōsuke and Wada Sanzō, while at the same time he was drawn to his tutors' interest in applied arts. After his study in Tokyo, he went to Paris for three years studying at Académie Art Moderne under Jean Marchand and Fernand Léger, while also taking private tutorials from Kees Van Dongen. Yen characteristically uses vivid colours and bold brushes in his landscape and portrait painting. He also favours 'primitive' subjects such as his portraits of the Yami tribal women and culture of Kōtō island (present Lanyu or Orchid Island) which display Western Oriental taste. (Fig. 3) Like the richly self-Orientalised works by Fujishima Takeji, these works show his urban modernist 'gaze' which he acquired in Tokyo and Paris. During his stay in Paris, he visited textile factories and ceramic factories in Sèvres, dye factories in Lyon, and developed his interest in applied arts.[1] Yen recollected later the pivotal moment that drove him further into applied arts, when he saw at a department store in Paris, Japanese craft products including 'tacky coloured parasols, and happy coats' which were 'awfully poor quality' and 'humiliatingly embarrassing' from a Japanese perspective.[2] Thus his interest in painting and his interest in industrial arts for export combined to become his life work.

After returning from studying abroad, Yen was appointed as a member of the jury for the western-style painting section of Taiwan Fine Arts Exhibition (*Taiten*) in 1934, which was the most prestigious official art exhibition during the Japanese colonial period. His design work also had a lucky break at this time. From 1932, he was engaged in designing advertisement posters for the

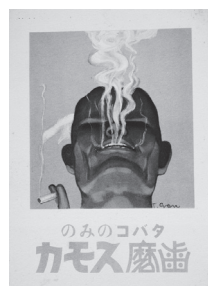


3. 'Formally Dressed Aboriginal Woman', oil, 60.5×50cm, 1978, private collection
(Source: *Lanyu, Zhuangshi, Yen Shuilong*, Taipei: Lion Art Publisher, 1993, p. 97)

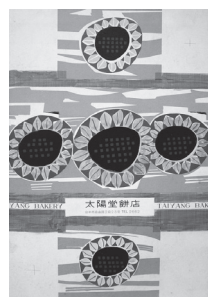
Kotobukiya company in Osaka, which sold 'Akadama Port Wine', as well as for the SMOCA Dentifrice Co Ltd. (Fig. 4) SMOCA commissioned the design work to young emerging artists such as Ishii Tsuruzō, Onchi Kōshirō, Kawakami Sumio and Yen, inspired by these talented artists, designed posters in Art Nouveau or caricature style. Yen's graphic design work in the postwar period includes the well-known wrapping paper with sunflower design for Taiyang Bakery in Taichung. (Fig. 5) Because of these works, Yen has now been called a father of commercial design.

Yen Shuulong's Taiwanese Industrial Handcrafts Movement

While Yen went back and forth between Japan and Taiwan, he formed the idea of establishing an institution of crafts in Taiwan, and so made a proposal to the colonial government in 1937. As a result, he was appointed as a consultant by the colonial government to conduct sponsored field research on Taiwanese folkcrafts by travelling around the country. His field research was co-sponsored by Japan's central national organization -Industrial Arts Research Institute (IARI or Kōgei Shidōsho), and he continued this research work in Japan until he went back to Taiwan permanently in 1940. This research became the foundation for his life-long career as the leader of the Taiwanese crafts movement. As he undertook the field research on the crafts in Taiwan, he came to realize the social and economic significance that crafts production would bring to improve the standard of living in agricultural villages. He promoted preservation of native crafts by Taiwanese aboriginal tribes along with



4. SMOCA Dentifrice Company's advertisement poster designed by Yen Shuulong, 43.5x31cm, 1934, private collection (Source: *The Public Spirit, Beauty in the Making Shui-Long Yen*, p. 222)



5. Taiyang Bakery package designed by Yen Shuulong, 1960s. (Source: *The Public Spirit, Beauty in the Making Shui-Long Yen*, p. 219)

the development of the designed products for a daily life that have a distinctive Taiwanese 'local colour'. While in Japan in 1941, IARI held the 1st Exhibition of Household Products for the Nation at Takashimaya department store in Tokyo.[3] It was aimed at presenting ideas of substitute design products as well as showing what was regarded as appropriate for a standard lifestyle to a nation at war. The *Mingei* (folkcrafts) Association played a large role in this exhibition presenting the reference section with 'mingei' crafts. As the only exhibitor from the Japanese colonies,[4] Yen exhibited his design for Dajia, a grass woven shopping bag, which was highly praised. (Fig. 6) This shopping bag was among the products (slippers, hats, door mats) which Yen designed for the Southern Asia Crafts Company which he founded in Tainan with support from the colonial government. It is such a modest design, but isn't it also somewhat sophisticated in the way it recalls the French tablecloth with check patterns we saw in his painting? When IARI published a special issue focused on Taiwan in 1943,[5] Yen contributed an article as one of the trustees of the Taiwan Seikatsu Bunka Shinkōkai (the Taiwan Household Culture Promotion Council) which was founded with the backing of the colonial government.[6] He cooperated with the national policy during the war by contributing to this Council's aim, described as the 'elevation and improvement of folk art' through 'daily household products' in order to 'provide strength and enrich the daily life of the people of the nation,' 'with original East Asian healthiness and tastefulness' and 'to protect and develop excellent local folk crafts.'[7]



6. Yen Shuulong, shopping bag, exhibited at the 1st Exhibition of Household Products for the Nation (Kokumin Seikatsu Yōhin Tenrankai in 1941, *Kōgei Nyūsu* (Industrial Art News), 10-11(1941): 462-463.

Minzoku Taiwan and the *Mingei* Movement: Crossover of Colonial Anthropology and *Mingei*

Yen Shuilong was the key person to bridge the two *Mingei* movements in Japan and Taiwan. While the *Mingei* movement led by Yanagi Sōetsu developed branches to collect *mingei* within the Japanese Empire during the war, the Taiwanese folkcrafts movement also evolved through activities of several intellectuals. This centred on the magazine *Minzoku Taiwan* (Taiwanese Folklore, 1941–45) under the editorship of Kanaseki Takeo, a professor of medicine at Taihoku Imperial University who specialized in physical anthropology, but who also took a keen scholarly interest in Taiwanese folklore and folkcrafts. (Fig. 7) This is a peculiarly interesting journal that resists definition, in that it presents studies of 'savage' high mountain tribes entwined with literati-style cultural interests, yet also presents political propaganda. In this journal Yen wrote a regular column called 'Kōbō Zufu' (Studio Pictures) which introduced Taiwanese crafts as part of his research and included his own illustrations. When Yanagi Sōetsu visited Taiwan in 1943, to give lectures and conduct research on Taiwanese *mingei*, this *Minzoku Taiwan* group organised Yanagi's trip (which was funded by the colonial government), and Yen travelled with Yanagi as a guide and translator.[8] The colonial government sponsored *Taiwan Daily Newspaper* (*Taiwan Nichinichi Shinpō*) reported, 'Yanagi's project is welcomed by various people...who expect that his efforts to show that the Oriental beauty in Taiwanese crafts that are deeply rooted in Taiwanese everyday life will overcome the taste for American and British styles.'[9] Yen's bamboo craft workshop was in the Guanmiao



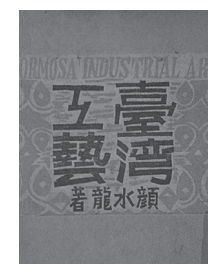
7. *Minzoku Taiwan* (Taiwanese Folklore), 4-3, 1944.

village in Tainan, the center for bamboo crafts and the place described by Yanagi as 'the best and almost ideal craft village in the world;[10] and as 'utopia in reality.'[11] Yanagi's big discovery of Taiwanese *mingei* was very much a result of Yen's guidance.

The US Economic Support during the Cold War and Taiwanese Export Craft Design

In 1952 after the war, Yen wrote a seminal book on the crafts of the Taiwanese aboriginal and Han people, *Taiwan Gongyi* (Formosan Industrial Art [*sic.*]) which was the first book of this kind by a Taiwanese. (Fig. 8) It is a catalogue of materially divided Taiwanese crafts based on Yen's prewar research, as well as his thesis on industrial crafts and Taiwanese culture. The cover of this book is illustrated with the Paiwan tribe's distinctive design of a swirling 'hyappoda' (hundred steps snake), and he enthusiastically calls for the preservation of the unique crafts made by Taiwan's aboriginal tribes while also examining its relation with the development of export crafts in the chapter of 'High Mountain crafts'.

Yen was appointed as a chief designer for the Taiwan Handicraft Promotion Center (THPC) which was established in 1956 under the KMT with powerful support from the US (given the context of the Cold War). At THPC he was engaged in developing craft design for export to the US jointly with the design team led by Russel Wright who had become influential in Japan through similar activities. (Fig. 9) Yen's postwar activities were characterised by his casual household design for the US using locally familiar materials that can be called Taiwanese modern. Unlike Modernist masterpieces, they



8. Yen Shuilong, *Taiwan Gongyi* (Formosan Industrial Art [*sic.*]), Taipei: Guanhwa Yinshuguan, 1952.



9. Yen, Petterson with a hat weaver Mrs Chow at the Wan-li district, *Zhongguo Shuogongye*, no.1, 1958.

are modest designs including shopping baskets, slippers, ties (Fig. 10) and bamboo cupboard for the kitchen and bamboo lounge chairs similar to the ones which used to be found in every household. (Fig. 11)

Yen's work in his later years comprised mosaic murals. From 1960 to 1994, together with his students he created many mosaic mural works throughout Taiwan. (Fig. 12) His interest in this type of art may have corresponded with the Japanese mosaic mural movement in the 1960s which developed through similar transnational artists, such as Okamoto Tarō and Kitagawa Tamiji who had been inspired by the Mexican socialist mural works.

Conclusion

Yen Shuiling's long career demonstrates his incredible multiple talents - as a Japanese western-style painter, a leader of the Taiwanese *Mingei* activist, an industrial designer, an educationalist and a muralist. His interest in crafts reflects the Japanese gaze on colonial Taiwan underpinned by Japanese colonial cultural policy, yet also maintaining the perspective of the Taiwanese insider, which is different from that of the Japanese colonialists. He managed to explore his creative activities through shrewd negotiations at the time of a difficult historical moment and uncertain living environment. It is clear that joint research of Japanese and Taiwanese scholars will make further interesting discoveries on this transnational artist's work.

Crafts and Daily Household Products

Yen Shuiling's work also informs us of the distinctively



10. Various woven grass products: A lotus stalk bag, woollen tie, rush table mat, design for tie, belt buckle, etc. designed by Yen Shuiling. Yen family collection.
(Source: *Lanyu, Zhuangshi, Yen Shuiling*, Taipei: Lion Art Publisher, 1993, p. 77)



11. Bamboo table lamp designed by Yen Shuiling, 30×18×50cm, 1957, private collection.
(Source: *The Public Spirit, Beauty in the Making Shui-Long Yen*, p.151)

East Asian themes that deserve the attention of design history studies. It tells us about the significance of modernity in the genre of crafts as dominant but ambiguously situated in the visual culture of East Asia. Currently, both in Japan and in Euroamerica, there is a heated debate on crafts surrounding the concept of 'everyday', and 'daily objects' which neither well fit into 'art', nor into 'applied art' and this is gradually gaining some attention in visual cultural studies. Obviously, this debate questions western modernism, but also points to the values in East Asian visual cultures that don't match up with western values. It also highlights contemporary East Asia's common interest in establishing the 'authentic' cultural identities that had been inspired by the ideas of 'vernacular' and 'everyday' as part of imported western modernity in the early 20th century. Further investigation is required in order to identify the subtle differences within East Asia, but further study on themes such as creativity and modernity in 'everyday craft-based objects' may present a more complex alternative picture of modernity to that suggested by the western models. In that sense I believe that Yen Shuiling's case presents an alternative perspective in design history studies.



12. Yen Shuiling, 'From the Agricultural Society to the Industrial Society', 1969. This work is located in the Yuanshan Jiantan park in Taipei where there was Taiwan Shrine during Japanese colonial time.

Notes

- [1] Chen Chin-fen's recollection in Lin Cheng-Wei, 'Taiwan ni okeru Mingei Undō no Juyō: Yanagi Sōetsu to Yen Shuilong' (The Reception of the Mingei Movement in Taiwan: Yanagi Sōetsu and Yen Shuilong), In Design History Forum and Fujita Haruhiko eds., *Kindai Kōgei Undō to Dezain Shi* (Modern Craft Movements and Design History), Shibunkaku, 2008, 280.
- [2] Yen Shuilong, 'Taiwan ni okeru "Kōgei Sangyō" no Hitsuyōsei' (The Need for "Crafts Industry" in Taiwan). *Taiwan Kōron* (Taiwan Gazette), 2-2 (1942): 22.
- [3] "Kokumin Seikatsu Yōhin Ten: Ippan Shuppinbutsu ni tsuite – Dai-ichirui' (Exhibition of Household Products for the Nation: Exhibits by the Public – Section). *Kōgei Nyūsu* (Industrial Art News) 10-11(1941): 458-463.
- [4] Ibid., 462-63.
- [5] *Kōgei Nyūsu*, 12-5 (1943), special issue on Taiwan.
- [6] The director of this organisation is the colonial government chief of culture and education, Nishimura Kōkei, and this council's office is also located in the Colonial-Government building. See further details in *Kōgei Nyūsu*, 12-5 (1943): 184-185.
- [7] 'Taiwan no Zōkei Bunka Undō' (Visual Culture Movements in Taiwan), *Kōgei Nyūsu* 12-5 (1943): 184-185.
- [8] There are many studies on Yen Shuilong in Taiwan including a series of research conducted by Hwang

- Shyh-huei's group at the National Yunlin University of Science & Technology), and by Yen Chuan-ying (Academia Sinica) who directed the 2012 exhibition at TFAM. Not much has been done in Japan, but Lin Cheng-Wei has published 'The Reception of the Mingei Movement in Taiwan: Yanagi Sōetsu and Yen Shuilong' in Design History Forum and Fujita Haruhiko eds., *Modern Craft Design Movements and Design History*, Kyoto: Shibunkaku, 2008, 277-291.
- [9] 'Yanagi Kanchō Shūshū no Min-geihin o Kōkai (A Public Exhibition of Folkcrafts Collected by Museum Director Yanagi), *Taiwan Nichinichi Shinpō*, (16 April 1943).
- [10] Yanagi Kanchō Shūshū no Min-geihin o Kōkai (A Public Exhibition of Folkcrafts Collected by Museum Director Yanagi). *Taiwan Nichinichi Shinpō*, (16 April 1943); Yanagi Sōetsu, 'Taiwan no Mingei ni tsuite' (On Taiwanese Folkcrafts), in *Yanagi Sōetsu Zenshū* (A Complete Works of Yanagi Sōetsu). Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1981. vol. 15, 611.
- [11] Yanagi's letter to Kawai Kanjirō dated 25 March 1943, in *Yanagi Sōetsu Zenshū*, vol. 22 *ge* (part 2), 137.

Illustrations

1. Yen Shuilong (Source: *Lanyu, Zhuangshi, Yen Shuilong*, Taipei: Lion Art Publisher, 1993, p. 81)
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