**Reconsidering craft from Japan’s Postcolonial Perspective**

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A question of ‘craft’ has ignited some passionate debate and in Anglo-America there has been an explosion of publications in English since the 1990s.[[1]](#endnote-1) As characterized by Glenn Adamson, ‘craft’ is victimized as ‘supplemental’ to ‘art’.[[2]](#endnote-2) This also echoes the Craft Council’s appeal to the Higher Education Funding Council for England in 2011 warning that craft is an SIV (strategically important and vulnerable subject).[[3]](#endnote-3) So while ‘craft’ has become an increasingly conceptualized art strategy for feminist art activism,[[4]](#endnote-4) artists such as Grayson Perry are using craft for ‘beating the bounds’ of art.[[5]](#endnote-5) Yet, ironically craft courses with long histories have been fast disappearing from Higher Education.[[6]](#endnote-6) In the last five years they were axed by 46%, even though craft contributes £3.4 billion to the economy and over 150,000 people in the UK make use of craft skills in creative industries, medicine and engineering. Subsequently, the Crafts Council launched an education manifesto ‘Our Future is in the Making: An Education Manifesto for Craft and Making’ at the House of Commons in November 2014.[[7]](#endnote-7) This was represented by Edmund de Waal, a leading contemporary ceramist and art critic, whose speech ‘Why Craft is Central’ offers a passionate appeal to the public to rethink craft as being intrinsic to humanity.[[8]](#endnote-8) His appeal addressed the policy makers and the public majority which s increasingly convinced that craft is an interesting strategy that fine artists can deploy, but not a suitable subject for higher education

In Japan, craft practice has been maintained through the apprenticeship system, and through being taught at modern technical schools as industrial technology. Western-style art colleges were established in late 19th with the oldest one - the Tokyo School of Fine Arts – established in 1889, but the main curriculum was centred on the idea of ‘fine art’ (i.e. painting and sculpture), and it was not until the 1960s-70s that we started to see ceramic art courses being created in higher education art colleges.[[9]](#endnote-9) Formal craft courses in Japan have followed a similar historical path to those in the UK, except in Japan these courses have survived through economic recession, the problem of decreasing student numbers and declining birth rate and in recent times there has even been a noticeable resurgence. In general, this is backed by the social belief that craft education is all rounded ‘superfood’, to use the words of Yoon Heechng, Professor of ceramics, providing knowledge and the essential human survival skills for living.[[10]](#endnote-10)

**The Postcolonial Craft Debate in Japan – ‘tradition’ and post-‘avant-garde’**

In Japan this of craft as ‘superfood’ is fully supported by the postcolonial craft debate led by the art historian Kitazawa Noriaki, design historian Mori Hitoshi and Inaga Shigemi, a scholar of comparative arts. The common tone is the idea of recuperating ‘tradition’ while repositioning ‘crafts’ to a more comfortable indigenous visual cultural environment, as had existed before the rupture caused by western intervention that demarcated ‘craft’ from ‘fine art’ and ‘design’. Through his influential publications[[11]](#endnote-11) including, Kitazawa examines the genealogy of imported and translated terminologies such as *bijutsu* (fine art) and *kōgei* (craft) and the subsequent restructure of the modern national art system in the late 19th century.[[12]](#endnote-12) Mori demands recognition of an original foundation of visual culture – the ‘botai’ (meaning fecund female body) of crafts, prior to the differentiation determined by western modernity in his *Modernity of Japanese ‘Crafts’: As a Foundation of Fine Art and Design* (2009).[[13]](#endnote-13) Inaga severely criticises the asymmetrical politico-cultural relations between Euroamerica and non-Euroamerica as the cause of a number of predicaments of crafts, and proposes ‘deconstruction of kōgei’ as a bottom up strategy by giving voice to the local perspective of Kyoto, Japan.[[14]](#endnote-14) The consensus reached by all three, is that crafts and craftsmanship are understood as ‘avant-garde without avant-gardism’ and ‘avant-garde in the age without avant-garde’ as Kitazawa puts it.[[15]](#endnote-15) This is a strong counter argument to the current situation in Anglo-American where the persistent legacy of Modernism centred on the notion of ‘avant-garde’, leaves crafts denigrated as supplemental, impure, and uncritical because they are ruled by ‘material’ and ‘skill’, to paraphrase Glenn Adamson.[[16]](#endnote-16)

**The Current State of Crafts in Japan**

Crafts in Japan today are uniquely diverse. They are primarily regarded as a form of highly specialised professional art, minutely institutionalised and factionalised, but unlike in Anglo-America, the demarcation of ‘craft’ from ‘fine art’ and ‘design’ is unclear and, in fact, irrelevant. In a very simplified manner, I will discuss the four distinctive types of professional craft activities that are developing in parallel, and the key critical issues they present.

**1. Traditional art crafts** **(*dentō kōgei*) and issue of ‘skills’ (*waza*)**

In traditional art crafts, the core works are created by master craftsmen designated as the ‘Living National Treasures’, and their disciples. This category was officially defined after the Second World War[[17]](#endnote-17) when the system for the designation and recognition of ‘Important Intangible Cultural Properties’ was established in 1955. The status is conferred on a person who hold skills ‘of particularly high value’ (*waza*) in the field specifically of ceramics, dye and weaving, lacquer, metal, wood and bamboo, doll making.[[18]](#endnote-18) Designated mastercraftsmen enjoy a high level of prestige, but also have a national responsibility to transmit these skills to the younger generation. The essential notion of Japanese ‘tradition’ is defined through craft skills (*waza*) and widely disseminated through an annual Exhibition of Japanese Traditional Art Crafts (*Nihon Dentō Kōgei ten*), which since 1954 has continued to exhibit works by these master craft makers and their disciples.[[19]](#endnote-19) This challenges the contentious idea of ‘skill’ in the Anglo-American debate,[[20]](#endnote-20) as Glenn Adamson laments, skills are reviled in the Modernist aesthetic theory as ‘supplemental’ and are placed in opposition to creativity.[[21]](#endnote-21) On the contrary, the Japanese indigenous term *waza*, (despite its discourse of nationalism) is one of the most respected notions in Japanese culture, and defensive justification is not required.

**2. *Mingei*-style crafts and function (*yō*)**

Following the *Mingei* or Japanese Folk Crafts movement led by Yanagi Sōetsu in the 1920s, *Mingei*-style crafts – traditional, handmade, functional crafts using regional materials and techniques – have continued. Both old *Mingei* and newly created *Mingei*-style crafts are currently undergoing a major revival. The younger generation, born long after Sōetsu Yanagi died, has rediscovered *Mingei* and lifestyle trends led by companies like Beams, a high-end boutique store, are rebranding *Mingei*. This phenomenon has successfully created a revival of 1950s Scandinavian and Japanese design in connection with *Mingei*. It is a current fashion trend, but it is also enmeshed with a philosophy of everyday life.

‘Function’ or ‘utility’ is intrinsically associated with the nature and structure of craft. However in Anglo-America since the late 19th century, ‘function’ in relation to decorative and applied arts was hierarchically demarcated and gradually relegated to a secondary status,[[22]](#endnote-22) resulting in a fierce defence from makers. In Japan, ‘function’ has not been an issue in the past, nor is it an issue in the current craft debate. No conflict accompanies looking at the objects’ artistic value with or without function as the people are familiar with the aesthetic value attached to tea bowls and utilitarian Mingei objects.

**3. *Kurafuto* / Craft design**

*Kurafuto* or craft design has roots in the export craft design of the 1920s and is centred on the activities of the Kōgei Shidōsho (national Industrial Arts Research Institute). In the 1950s these types of crafts were promoted as part of the global ‘Good Design’ movement, and Japan also set up its own version in 1957 called the ‘Good Design’ award system, which has tended to reward products that originated from locally made *Mingei* objects but included some involvement of contemporary design and designers. They are partially hand and machine-made, not as one-offs but in small to mid-sized companies. MUJI, in fact emerged from this line of development (i.e. *kurafuto).* Productive collaboration between regional manufacturers and designers characterises this field. In 2004, the Japanese government launched its ‘Japan Brand’ project, which subsidises and advises regional handcrafts industries with the aim of revitalising regional economies through the development of branding that could be both useful for the contemporary Japanese lifestyle, and marketable worldwide.

**4. Craft art or ‘craftical formation’**

This last type of craft comprises individualistic one-off works, often produced by art college graduates and categorised as studio crafts. Many female artists can be found working in this area, outside the state-sponsored, highly privileged field of traditional art craft. Whether working with traditional functional forms or not, makers pursue individual expression as is customary in fine-art practice, but the works reflect an obsession with specific materials and techniques which a former chief curator of craft gallery at MOMA Tokyo Kaneko Kenji calls ‘craftical formation’. According to Kaneko, ‘craftical formation’ is achieved through material relativism, a material driven rather than concept driven approach. Forms are determined by the chosen material, the making process and techniques involved rather than by a pre-conceived intellectual idea. Recently, artists have eloquently contributed to what Kaneko calls a ‘new logic of creating form’. For example, metal artist Hashimoto Masayuki stated in 1996: ‘To be able to limit oneself to one material and its associated techniques is to have the freedom to reject freedom. The issue is whether or not one can make the logic of materials implied by adherence to a set of limitations the starting point for the realisation of one’s creative ambitions’.[[23]](#endnote-23) The dynamics between materials, techniques and primal forms were brilliantly articulated by female basketry artist Sekijima Hisako (1988) with her ‘formula of basketry’, inspired by Noam Chomsky’s ‘transformational generative grammar’. She has devised a grammar of basketmaking through an understanding of the relationship between the intrinsic nature of different materials and basketry/textile techniques, and of how these relationships create inevitable forms and structures.[[24]](#endnote-24)

Within this logic of materials, the totality of the body experience is also well expressed. The nature of craft and craft practice involves a haptic, optic and sensory experience, as a holistic and visceral physiological human experience of perception. Sekijima Hisako’s use of the analogy of the bird’s nest to suggest the unity of body and craftwork also provides an effective explanation of this idea. The totality of the work and the body of a bird’s nest comes from selection of a particular kind: of the size and weight of a material, determined by the physical characteristics of a bird, and of the form, determined by the bird’s posture of making while flying in the air.[[25]](#endnote-25)

**Untranslatable values and terminologies**

As I discussed above, the essential issues such as avant-gardeness, skill, function, totalness of body and mind, and the in-between space of craft and design or craft and art debated in Japan presents local cultural specificities and untranslatableness when you look at it from the Anglo-American perspective. Untranslatableness is also an issue of terminologies. For example, ‘decoration’ which has been belittled by modern art history and associated with craft has been problematic in Anglo-America as Adamson noted,[[26]](#endnote-26) but its equivalent Japanese term *kazari* (decoration) contains a powerful idea as the eminent art historian Tsuji Nobuo managed to rewrite a history of Japanese visual culture by putting ‘decoration’ at the centre.[[27]](#endnote-27) MOMA Tokyo’s exhibition *The Power of Decoration: A Viewpoint on Contemporary Kōgei* (2009) was also successful in delivering the Japanese perspective on ‘decoration’, strongly supported by contemporary artists whose work is characterised by excessive decoration. Art historian Tsuruoka Mayumi argues that all Japanese art is applied or decorative art, giving the example of the *fusuma* (sliding door) in the Japanese house, which is painted but has function, alongside ‘haptic beauty’, in the specifically built environment.[[28]](#endnote-28) With her strong view that fine art has been supplemental to applied or decorative art in Japanese art throughout history, she urges to ‘avoid being swallowed by the western global standard’[[29]](#endnote-29) Terminology issues seem to excite Japanese endlessly. *Kōgei*, the very term indicating ‘craft’ is now promoted by Kaneko Kenji for its use in non-Japanese texts outside Japan to replace the English term ‘craft’ which has the problematic derogatory ideas attached.[[30]](#endnote-30) Although Japan’s postcolonial stance on recovering its ownership of craft matters may have some neo-nationalistic pitfalls, it still provides us some food for thought. If the demand for rewriting of craft centred visual cultural history are coming from below and the subjective regional everyday perspective is involved, then I believe this is the direction from which policy and pedagogy has to come as well.

1. For a good critical summary of the issues addressed by representative publications, see Greenhalgh, Paul. 2009. 'Words in the World of the Lesser: Recent Publications on the Crafts’. *Journal of Design History* 22: 401-11. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Glenn Adamson, *Thinking Through Craft.* Oxford: Berg, 2007. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. http://www.craftscouncil.org.uk/content/files/13-hefce-important-vulnerable-subjects.pdf [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Various artists strategies are discussed in Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, London: The Women’s Press, 2012 (1984); and Elissa Auther, *String, Felt, Thread: The Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2010. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Grayson Perry, BBC Reith Lecture 2013, Part 2: ‘Playing to the gallery – Beating the Bounds’. Available online at [http://www.bbc.co.uk/podcasts/series/reith]. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. For example, the closure of historically important ceramic art courses such as at Goldsmiths (1994), Glasgow School of Art (2008), Edinburgh College of Art (2008), Bath Spa University (2011), Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art & Design at University of Dundee. The closure of ceramic art course at my own institution UAL’s Camberwell College of Arts in 2012 which had over 100 year history since 1907, and the closure of the studio pottery course of the Harrow School of Art as part of University of Westminster in 2013 after fifty year of history were the recent cases. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. ‘Our Future is in the Making’ available from <http://www.craftscouncil.org.uk/content/files/7822_Education_manifesto%4014FINAL.PDF> [accessed 22/02/2015]. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Edmund de Waal, ‘Why Craft is Central’ in *Crafts*, January-February (2015): 25; also in http://www.craftscouncil.org.uk/articles/why-craft-is-central/ [accessed 22/02/2015]. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. For example, The Tokyo University of the Arts in 1964, Tama Art University in 1975. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. ‘Superfood’ is translation of the Japanese term ‘kanzen shokuhin’ which was used by Yoon Heechang (Associate Professor in Ceramics) who’s idea is reflecting on the course curriculum for one of the most popular craft courses at Tama Art University. ‘Tamabi no Jugyō’ [Courses at Tama Art University] in ‘Daigaku ni okeru Korekara no Kōgei Kyōiku’ [Craft Education towards Future at Higher Education], Tama Art University Craft Department, Ceramic Institute ed., Tama Art University Joint Project 2006-2007, *The Proceedings of Atarashii Tōgei Kyōiku o meguru Sōgō Kenkyū*, http://www.tamabi.ac.jp/kougei/archive/article\_archive/research/2nd/04.html [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. For example, Kitazawa Noriaki, *Me no Shinden* [The Shrine of Eyes], Tokyo: Bijutsu Shuppansha, 1989, *Kyōkai no Bijutsushi* [The Art History of Boundaries], Tokyo: Brücke, 2000; and *Avangyarudo ikō no Kōgei* [Craft after the Avant-garde], Tokyo: Bigaku Shuppan, 2003. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. The new term *bijutsu* was officially used at the time of Japan’s attendance at the Vienna International Exhibition in 1873. While the primary definition of the term *kōgei* is ‘industry’ and this encompasses a broad range of concepts associated with industrial, commercial and hand-made products. When the national academy exhibition called *Monbushō Bijutsu Tenrankai* (Ministry of Education Arts Exhibition, sometimes abbreviated to *Bunten*) was established in 1907, modelled after the French Salon, *kōgei* was excluded from the categories. It was not represented at the exhibition until the ‘Craft Art’ section was added in 1928 to a reorganised *Teikoku Bijutsu Tenrankai* (abbreviated to *Teiten* and translated as the ‘Imperial Arts Exhibition’), reflecting the first wave of the studio craft movement. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Mori Hitoshi, *Nihon ‘Kōgei’ no Kindai: Bijutsu to Dezain no Botai toshite* [Modernity of Japanese ‘Crafts’: As a Foundation of Fine Art and Design]. Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 2009. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Inaga Shigemi, *Dentō Kōgei Saikō: Kyō no Uchi to Soto* [Traditional Japanese Arts & Crafts: A Reconsideration from Inside and Outside Kyoto]. Kyoto: Shibunkaku Shuppan; Inaga Shigemi and Patricia Fister, eds. 2005. *Nihon no Dentō Kōgei Saikō* [Traditional Japanese Arts and Crafts in the 21st Century: Reconsidering the Future from an International Perspective]. Kyoto: International Research Center for Japanese Studies, 2007. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Kitazawa 2003, 16-18. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Adamson 2007. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. According to art historian Tsuji Shigebumi, the term ‘*dentō*’, meaning ‘tradition’, acquired positive and nationalistic connotations in the late 1930s and frequently went hand in hand with the tide of ultra-nationalism during the war. This continued to the 1950s and onwards with the official systematisation of ‘*dentō kōgei*’ (traditional craft) and ‘*dentō geijutsu*’ (traditional arts). Tsuji Shigebumi, *Dentō: Sono Sōshutsu to Tensei* [Its Creation and Transformation]. Tokyo: Shinyōsha, 2003. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. For a description of how this system operates and how it has created paradoxes and controversies, see Michel Bambling, ‘Japan’s Living National Treasures Program: The Paradox of Remembering’. In *Perspectives on Social Memory in Japan*, edited by Tsu Yun Hui, Jan Van Bremen and Eyal Ben-Ari, 148-69.Folkestone: Global Oriental, 2005. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Every autumn, the exhibition opens at the Mitsukoshi department store in Tokyo and travels throughout the nation to be hosted at major department stores from Hokkaidō to the Okinawan islands over a period of six months. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. For example, David Pye’s ‘workmanship of risk’ in David Pye, *The Nature and Art of Workmanship*, London: The Herbert Press, 1995 (1968); Peter Dormer’s adaptation of Michael Polyanyi’s idea ‘tacit knowledge’ in Peter Dormer, *The Art of the Maker*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1994. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Adamson, Glenn. 2007. *Thinking Through Craft.* Oxford: Berg. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Paul Greenhalgh, ‘The History of Craft’. In *The Culture of Craft: Status and Future*, edited by Peter Dormer, 20-52. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Kaneko 2002, 33. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Shiraishi Masami, Toyojirō Hida and Masanori Moroyama, eds. *Sozai no Ryōbun* [The Domain of the Medium]. Tokyo: Craft Gallery, National Museum of Modern Art Tokyo, 1994, 86. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Sekijima Hisako. *Basuketarī no Teishiki* [The Formula of Basketry]. Tokyo: Sumai no Toshokan, 1988, 76. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Adamson 2007, 31-32. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Tsuji Nobuo, *Nihon Bijutsu no Mikata* [Ways of Seeing Japanese Art], Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1992; Tsuji Nobuo, *‘Kazari’ no Nihon Bunka* [The Japanese Culture of ‘Kazari’].Kyoto: Kokusai Nihon Bunka Kenkyū Sentā, 1998. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Fukumoto Shigeki ed. *21 Seiki wa Kōgei ga Omoshiroi* [Kōgei is Fascinating in the 21st Century]. Tokyo: Kyūryūdō, 2003, 68-72. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Fukumoto ed., 2003, 68-72. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. ‘Kōgei kara KOGEI e’ (From Kōgei to KOGEI), *Asahi* *Newspape*r, 28 January 2010. This movement is also an obvious part of the government’s recent cultural policy which cultural critic Iwabuchi Kōichi calls the ‘branding of soft culture’, whereby Japan’s uniqueness is marketed with a view towards increasing national income through consumption and tourism, in Iwabuchi Kōichi. *Bunka no Taiwaryoku: Sofuto Powā to Burando Nashonarizumu o Koete* [The Dialogical Power of Culture: Beyond Soft Power and Brand Nationalism]. Tokyo: Nihon Keizai Shinbunsha, 2007. The use of Japanese terminologies in the global context can be seen in the examples such as *anime*, *manga* and *washoku. Washoku* (Japanese cuisine) was designated as Intangible Cultural Heritage by UNESCO in 2014 as a result of successful lobbying on the part of the Japanese government. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)