

# Review Essay Traditional Japanese Arts and Crafts : Historical and Political Trajectories from the Meiji Period until Today

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Review Essay

## Traditional Japanese Arts and Crafts

Historical and Political Trajectories from the Meiji Period until Today<sup>1</sup>

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What do we talk about when we talk about traditional Japanese arts and crafts? What types of objects are included in this category and what cultural, social and ideological meanings do they entail? And finally, how have traditional Japanese arts been invented and reinvented throughout the history of modern Japan in order to shape a unified and monolithic image of Japanese culture in a period of national identity making? In the popular imagination, the expression "traditional Japanese arts and crafts" often entails cultural expressions connected with the past and that convey specific ideas of "Japaneseness", such as the tea ceremony, flower arrangement, martial arts, woodblock prints and ceramics, amongst others. In this article, we will not to discuss the origin and features of these arts, but will instead examine them in the context of an institutionalized national discourse that reflects historical, political and social processes involved in the making of images of Japan. The goal is to discuss the definition of traditional Japanese crafts and show how their identity is intertwined with political ideologies, historical constructions and cultural representations. Starting from the first participations of Japan in the International Exhibitions of late nineteenth century, the rediscovery of old pottery kilns and the revival of tea ceremony amongst the urban elite in the 1920s, the folk crafts movement of the prewar and postwar years, the creation of the title of Living National Treasure in the 1950s and the more recent "Cool Japan" nation branding, this article will illustrate the main historical moments that have contributed to the definition, reinvention and revitalization of certain traditional Japanese arts in the last one hundred and fifty years, drawing on authors from the field Japanese studies, social sciences, philosophy and art history from a transnational and transdisciplinary perspective.

**Keywords:** images of Japaneseness, cultural nationalism, traditional arts and crafts

### Introduction

In the last three decades, many authors (Sugimoto & Mouer, 1986; Befu, 1987, 2001; Oguma, 1995, 2002; Morris-Suzuki, 1998; Lie, 2001) have questioned the notions of natural nation and ethnic homogeneity in the context of Japan disseminated by the so-called theories of Japanese uniqueness (*nihonjinron*). Concomitantly to the deconstruction of the idea of nation (see Anderson, 1983), the concept of tradition has also been conceptualized as something "invented" in order to inculcate a set of normative values and behaviors through the establishment of a continuity with the past (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983). Similarly, the definition of art has also been a field of ongoing dispute and recently started being regarded not as something fixed but as a modern invention (Shiner, 2003) and a social system with origins in the eighteenth century Europe (Luhmann, 2000).

Accordingly, the question of authenticity frequently arises when talking about national culture and cultural traditions. And while no cultural practice is truly authentic, the Japanese government has taken an active part in reframing (trans)cultural practices within a quintessential and monolithic idea of "Japaneseness". Furthermore, popular images of the country and its traditional culture still reproduce simplistic stereotypes that often disregard

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ethnic and minority groups as well as important cultural variations at a local and regional level, overlooking questions of gender, class and, often times, historical period. Therefore, the expression Japanese traditional arts possess the same issues as the words that compose it and is thus invariably shaped by history, society and political ideologies.

## 1. Meiji period

Cultural and artistic exchanges between Japan and West started with the arrival of European Jesuits to the Japanese archipelago in 1549, prompting the first exports of Japanese objects to Europe. However, it was only in the second half of the nineteenth century that Japanese objects became available to a wider audience, after the period of seclusion ended with treaties to open Japanese ports that would eventually lead to Meiji Restoration in 1868. This coincided with the beginning of the World Exhibitions that took place in Europe and the United States from the second half of the nineteenth century with the goal of promoting the culture and industry of participating countries. As a newly formed nation, Japan was aware of the importance of presenting itself to the public on the international stage (Irvine, 2013).

While the first of the World Exhibitions took place in London in 1851, it was only two years later that Japanese objects would first be seen in Dublin. In 1867, Japan sent delegates to the Paris World Exhibition, which received over nine million visitors and marked the beginning of the fad for Japanese things. This gave birth to the term 'Japonisme', with Japanese crafts having a great impact on Western artists. But it was in the Vienna World Exhibition of 1873 that the recently formed Meiji government officially participated in the international event for the first time. It was also then that the word *bijutsu* appeared as a translation of the word "art" and the word *kōgei* as the translation for "craft" and, from then on, craft would come to refer generally to manufactured products, such as pottery, lacquered woodwork, metal or any other type of "artistic" utilitarian objects that didn't fit in the Western category of art, which was essentially restricted to works of painting and sculpture.

In fact, while certain crafts, in particular the ceramics related to the tea ceremony, have been seen as "artistic" in Japan since feudal times, the existing word for "art" (*geijutsu*) in premodern Japan used to comprise a broader meaning than its Western counterpart (Moeran, 1997: 13). According to art historian Doshin Sato (2011: 76), *geijutsu* was originally used to refer to the six skills (*rikugei*) that any Chinese man must possess: moral behavior, music, archery, equestrian art, calligraphy and mathematics, thus generally denoting "an extremely high level of achievement in technical areas". However, with the importation of the Western concept of art to Japan, which became dominant from the late nineteenth century onwards, the focus on the idea of skill was changed to the concept of beauty (*bi*), creating a separated word for craft (*kōgei*).

Yet, the Meiji government's engagement with Western concepts, technologies and institutions, encouraged by a need to equal the West as a modern world power, did not only lead to the creation of two new words (*bijutsu* and *kōgei*) that originally encompassed cultural practices expressed by only one (*geijutsu*). It also created a previously nonexistent hierarchy between cultural expressions that took root in the newly-created Japanese art world. In fact, one of the most important Japanese art exhibitions of the early twentieth century, the Ministry of Education Art Exhibition (*Buten*), created in 1907 and renamed Imperial Art Exhibition (*Teiten*) in 1919, only exhibited works of fine art, such as painting and sculpture, excluding craft from its categories. Because of that, Japanese craftsmen were confined to the crafts exhibitions organized by the Ministry of Commerce and Agriculture, even though it was mainly by virtue of crafts that Japan was greatly praised in the global stage (Moeran, 1997: 14).

In fact, the international success of Japanese crafts in the 1873 Vienna exhibition led the Meiji government to realize the potential of Japanese exports and thus, in 1876, the Government Craft Design Office (*Seihin Gazu-gakari*) was established as a department within the Ministry of Internal Affairs with the role of defining guidelines for the designs to be created for the Paris Universal Exhibition of 1878 (Yokomizu, 2013: 68). The Government Craft Design Office led to the creation of the Japan Art Association (*Ryuchikai*) in 1879, which aimed to promote the national industry and craft by encouraging the creation of designs that appealed to a Western audience.

As a result, the Western fad for things Japanese led Japanese crafts to become an important export product under the policy of industry and manufacture promotion (*shokusan kogyo*), acquiring high status as industrial goods (Sato, 2011: 192). However, for its industrial character, *kogei* (crafts) began to be confused with *kogyo* (industry), since similarly to Europe before the widespread of industrialization, not only it was difficult to separate art from craft, but also craft from industry in late nineteenth century Japan (Moeran, 1997: 13). Thus, in order to stress the artistic qualities of Japanese crafts, the word *bijutsu kogei* (artistic crafts) started to be used from 1885 at the industrial domestic exhibitions. According to Kamogawa (2015: 17), the term was created in order to stress the position of handicrafts as an art form, distinguish it from the manufacturing industry and establish its cultural role as a uniquely Japanese form of art.

In 1890, the Ministry of Education and the Imperial Household Agency took over the development of artistic crafts (*bijutsu kogei*), naming artisans under the title of "Imperial Arts and Crafts Experts", who received support in exchange for producing works for the international exhibitions. Through these, the Meiji government took an active part in the construction of an idealized quintessential image of a Japan, which responded to Western anxieties about industrialization and romantic visions of a rural past (Karatani, 1998). The discovery of Japanese art by the West

represented, in part, a search for Europe's lost pre-modern past, making Japan a ghost of that past and an idealized reflection of it.

Because of its international success and marketability abroad, craftwork was supported by the Japanese government to increase its trade revenue and adopted as a symbol of the newly created nation. High-quality handmade crafts not only distinguished Japan from the West, who had lost a great part of its craft traditions after the Industrial Revolution but also showed to Western nations that Japan had something superior to them. Furthermore, this period of asserting itself towards the West was also characterized by an ideology that was verging upon nationalism, prompted by the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War in 1894. In that way, the revaluation of almost obsolete craft practices, which were reinvented and considered traditional, reveals the Meiji government's attempt to build a continuity with the past, a practice that has often characterized nationalist policies. Waal (2002: 190) has compared the Japanese government's approach to crafts during this period to Germany's Third Reich support and promotion of *volkisch* craftwork as a way of exalting national identity.

The inflow of Japanese things into Western middle and upper-class daily life led to the need to keep up with the high demand through mass production and a consequent fall in the standards of craft objects, as revealed in the criticism to the Japanese participation in the 1900 Paris Exhibition (Pollard, 2003: 80). At this time, art had started to occupy a central place in the international exhibitions and Japanese objects were criticized for its lack of progress in comparison to the West since only in non-industrialized countries art was synonymous with handmade goods (*op. cit.*). Therefore, mechanization, industrialization and mass production deflated the "aura" of Japanese crafts in Western eyes.

All in all, in a wish to catch up with the West, Japan's rapid industrial advancements clashed with Europe's romantic nostalgia for its own pre-industrial past. Feeling discontent with its own modernity, the West had found in Japan a glimpse of its lost pre-industrial past and therefore Japanese modernization, industrialization and militarization appeared as a threat to an idealized, innocent and peaceful image of a "traditional Japan" promoted by the Japanese government itself. Thus, after capitalizing on Western tastes and industrializing its production to meet foreign demand, the craze for Japanese things started gradually fading as Japan emulated the modern West, establishing itself as a colonial power after the Russo-Japanese War in 1904-1905.

## 2. Interwar developments

While the development of Japanese crafts from the second half on the nineteenth century was dominated by a tendency towards mechanization and standardization, the beginning of the new century saw the rise of artist-craftsmen who stressed the importance of individual creative expression influenced by the Western modernist movement. In this context, after the Taisho era (1910-1926), craft began to be recognized as an artistic expression and a crafts section was introduced at the Imperial Arts Exhibition (*Teiten*) in 1927. The appearance of artist-craftsmen was parallel with other movements that sought to acknowledge the beauty of handmade mass-produced objects, such as the folk crafts movement (*mingei*) and the peasant art movement (*nomin bijutsu*), which aimed to raise the manifestations of everyday, rural and simple life to the level of art. The growing modernization and urbanization of the Taisho era (1912-1926) also brought anxieties with modernity to Japan, propelling a search for its own endangered past and traditions. The expansion of the Japanese Empire led to the need to recover a shared past, boosting folklore studies and archaeological excavations, which in turn led to a growing interest for Japanese traditional practices that had been ignored during the first decades of modernization (Moeran, 1997: 14).

In fact, during this period, Japan saw the development of a new urban and educated middle class, which appropriated forms of recreation and consumption that had before been limited to the enjoyment of a mostly male aristocratic and intellectual elite (Brandt, 2007: 74). According to Atsushi (2014: 4-7), the beginning of Taisho era marked the first stage of Japan's consumer society, which developed between 1912 and 1941 exclusively in major metropolitan areas such as Tokyo, where the population grew from 6.6 percent in 1920 to 10.2 percent in 1940. Still, this increasingly urbanized and westernized middle class only accounted for between 10 to 20 percent of the Japanese population. Thus, the majority of the Japanese still lived poverty in rural areas and some still earned their life making handmade goods in small family enterprises, which were then consumed by a small minority of the middle and upper class (*ibid.*: 10). In this context, the revival of Japanese traditions appeared as a reaction to urbanization, modernization and westernization and saw cultural traditions that had only been practiced within old aristocratic families being appropriated by this growing urban middle class as symbols of wealth, social status and a shared sense of national identity.

One of the most emblematic Japanese cultural practices that underwent significant reappraisal during the beginning of Showa era was that of the tea ceremony, which would come to represent a quintessential image of "Japaneseness" until today. One of the factors that contributed to the revival of the "way of tea" (*chado*) was the success of Kakuzo Okakura's (1862-1913) seminal monograph *The Book of Tea*. Originally published in English in 1906 with the aim of reaching a Western audience, it was only translated into Japanese twenty-three years later, in 1929, coinciding with the peak of Japan's imperial venture and the ideology of nationalism. In his work, Okakura defines Japanese identity through the tea ceremony, which he considers one of the most representative symbols of Japanese aesthetic culture, emphasizing its superiority based on the precepts of Zen-Buddhism and harmony with

nature. Influenced by the idealism of the German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel (1770-1831), Okakura is considered the founding father of the "myth of Asian spiritualism" (Marra, 1999: 65-71) and thus, it was largely thanks to him that *chanoyu* came to be seen as a metaphor for Japan's cultural identity, a paradigm of the "Japanese soul" or an ideal representation of it (Rocha, 1996). Kristen Surak (2013) has also thoroughly examined the relationship between the tea ceremony, Japaneseness and cultural nationalism. In fact, through its institutional organizations, the way of tea still acts as an important tool in the maintenance and reproduction of the ideology of homogeneity not only in Japan but also abroad, where the Urasenke school is established in over one hundred different countries. This role of tea as a representation of a "Japanese spirit" is also visible in the fact that the tea ceremony is almost always present in events related to Japanese culture abroad, as explored by Guichard-Anguis (2001).

Another author that attempted to define Japan by the contrast between Western materialism and Asian aesthetics and spirituality was Sōetsu Yanagi (1889-1961), who founded the *mingei* (folk arts) movement together with potters Shoji Hamada and Kawai Kanjiro in the mid-1920s. Seeking the recognition of the cultural, artistic, social and spiritual role of traditional handicrafts in a moment when Japanese traditions seemed endangered by the fast-paced modernization and urbanization, it praised the beauty inherent to objects handmade by anonymous craftsmen to be used in the daily lives of ordinary people. Fueled by the growing urban middle-class and its nostalgia for a Japanese rural past that was slowly disappearing, it drew on a combination of Western romantic ideals with Zen Buddhist concepts and the aesthetics of the tea ceremony.

In her study about the politics of folk craft in imperial Japan, Brandt (2007) has shown how, in the interwar period, the concern for traditions endangered by modernization, together with the development of a new urban consumer culture, contributed to the promotion of a new aesthetic based on traditional cultural practices, which was reflected in the growing popularity of folk crafts. In particular, department stores, which sprang across Japan's major cities from the 1920s, had a major role in the sale and promotion of *mingei* products, not only through commercialization but also through temporary exhibitions that presented the latest trends (*ibid.*: 106-107). According to the author, the popularity of folk crafts derived in part from its connection to a quintessential "Japanese spirit" that matched the nationalistic thinking of the time (*ibid.*: 123).

The success of *The Book of Tea* and the impact of the *mingei* movement led to the proliferation of archaeological excavations in traditional areas of ceramic production, prompting a resurgence of the ceramics used in the tea ceremony during the Momoyama period (1568-1615). This gave birth to a movement known as Momoyama revival in the 1930s, mostly translated into ceramics and which had potters Toyo Kaneshige (1896-1967) and Toyozo Arakawa (1894-1985) as its most representative artists. Encouraged by the nationalistic climate of the time, artists interested in the technical aspect of utensils for the tea ceremony began to investigate the works produced in the so-called six ancient kilns of Japan (*rokkoyo*). By reproducing the techniques used in those containers, which had lost popularity during the Edo period, they contributed to establish a continuity with the past through their artistic work (Moeran, 1997). In fact, Moeran (1990) argues that many of the regions known today as old traditional ceramic kilns, such as those named after the styles Mino, Karatsu, Bizen and Mashiko, were rediscovered by the potters Toyozo Arakawa, Muan Nakazato, Toyo Kaneshige and Shoji Hamada respectively in the 1930s. Furthermore, while the famous six-old kilns terminology was created by potter and scholar Fujio Koyama in the post-war era, the terminology doesn't reflect the diversity of regions with active pottery kilns in the medieval period, which well exceeds the count of six.

In sum, while at the beginning of the Meiji period, Japanese crafts were seen as important export items, functioning also a symbolic resource to convey images of Japan as a modern nation to the West, in the interwar period they started to be appropriated by a growing middle class as distinctive everyday commodities and a vanishing cultural resource, encouraged by feelings of nostalgia and a quest for an idealized and soon to be lost past. In addition to folk crafts, the interest in rurality and tradition acquired new meanings, strengthened by the threat that industrialization and urbanization posed to the preservation of traditional lifestyles. This contributed to the rise of domestic tourism as a form of recreation of a new urban middle class, fueled by a growing infrastructure of railways and inns leading to a domestic tourist boom in the postwar era.

### 3. Post-war period

After a period of cessation of craft activities during the Second World War, the postwar era saw the establishment of several governmental measures put in place to protect traditional culture in a context of redefining national identity after the Japanese defeat. At an international level, there was a need to change the image of the country from military aggressor to a peace-loving democracy and the traditional arts and crafts, associated with Zen aesthetics, cooperative work, and harmony with nature, had also a role to play in this process.

Originated from a series of measures for the preservation of historical, artistic and cultural heritage that date back to the Meiji period, the Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties (*Bunkazai Hogōhō*) was first enacted in 1950 as a reaction to a fire in the Hōryūji temple in Kyoto. The original provisions of the law included three categories: tangible cultural properties, such as buildings, paintings and crafts; intangible cultural properties, which include endangered traditional techniques and various performing arts; and historic sites, places of scenic beauty and natural monuments. The enactment of the law led to the establishment of the Committee for the Protection of

Cultural Properties, a precursor of the Agency for Cultural Affairs (*Bunkacho*), created in 1968 as an extra-ministerial bureau of the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture.

Since 1954, the Agency for Cultural Affairs has been responsible for selecting individuals and groups as official carriers of intangible cultural properties, a title colloquially known as Living National Treasure (*ningen kokuho*). The receivers of the title are bestowed with an annual stipend of two million yen, as well as national and international prestige, in order to give continuity to traditional techniques through the training of successors and documentation. However, in 1955, the Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties was revised in order to include not only endangered traditional techniques but also "important intangible cultural properties". Rupert Faulkner (2001: 3-4) argues that the initial scope of the measure was extended in order to cover practices that were not necessarily in danger of being lost but that were important for historical or artistic reasons, showing a cultural agenda that has been institutionalizing preferred models, such as those of the tea ceremony. By receiving this title, a named craftsman is recognized not only in the artistic qualities of his work but also in the regional and national relevance of his techniques, with his social importance impacting directly on his local community.

Harumi Befu (2001) has also argued that the governmental measures for the protection of cultural properties often reflect the state's approval of certain types of art and the institutional promotion of aesthetic values seen as traditional. One example is the case of the ceramics of the Bizen region, where between 1955 and 2004 five potters have received the title of Living National Treasure, not because the technique was in danger of extinction, but because it represents a quintessential Japanese character, particularly through its identification as one of the "six old kilns of Japan" and its close connection with the aesthetics tea ceremony. However, other crafts that do not conform to the state's ideal of "Japaneseness" do not often receive the government's support and thus struggle for survival.

Besides these symbolic power unbalances, the title of Living National Treasure has also perpetuated gender inequalities that are due, in part, to the traditional system of *iemoto*, in which the transmission of craft techniques is passed down through patrilineal lineage. This is observable in the fact that, in a total of seventy individuals considered Living National Treasures today, only eleven are women, most of which produce works traditionally associated with female domestic activities, such as textiles and dolls.

Yet, the institutionalization of preferred models includes not only the aesthetics of the tea ceremony and the ancient pottery kilns with centuries-old history but also the more recent *mingei*. In fact, Brandt (2007: 225) argues that the relations between the Mingei Association established in 1934 and the state during the war period are visible in "the very identification of traditional handicraft techniques as an invaluable national resource, along with the high proportion of mingei artist-craftsmen among those first named Living National Treasures". The author further points that, within the first four Living National Treasures designated by the Japanese government in 1955, two were related to the *mingei* movement. This shows how, by the end of the Second World War, *mingei* had received official approval and ratification from the Japanese state, becoming known to almost all Japanese by the 1960s and thus turning into a "household word, a widely diffused type of commodity, and a seamless part of the common sense of Japanese cultural identity" by the 1970s (*ibid.*: 2).

As a result, the 1960s and 1970s saw an enormous demand for folk crafts known as the "*mingei* boom", which coincided with a process of avid Americanization and the consequent nostalgia for Japanese tradition and the rural countryside (Moeran, 1997: 211). According to the author, the boom contributed to the revitalization but also the standardization of traditional pottery centers, leading to the establishment of new kilns around Japan and the expansion of crafts exhibitions in urban centers. Furthermore, the development of domestic tourism encouraged urban and suburban Japanese to travel to remote sites of Japan and discover traditional aspects of their culture before it was lost forever, contributing to this boom. Besides *omiyage*, many Japanese tourists began collecting objects associated with the rural past, leading to a growing interest and consumption of folk crafts in the post-war period.

In this context, during the postwar years, department stores continued to play an important role in the promotion and commercialization of Japanese cultural traditions, leading to a retro boom in the 1970s and 1980s. According to Creighton (1998), the flourishing of Japanese consumer society in the decades after the war, together with the fact that most Japanese now lived in metropolitan areas and led a modern, westernized and affluent lifestyle that had allowed them to obtain a high level of consumer goods, led department stores to start focusing on leisure activities by helping more affluent customers to discover fulfilling lifestyles. Thus, the focus on the selling of things was redirected to the selling of experiences, leading to what the author calls "a marketing age of *mono igai no mono*, or selling 'things other than things'" (*ibid.*: 128.). This tendency is visible in the expansion of cultural and art institutions, learners and enthusiasts during this period. This shows how, in this context of economic abundance, the Japanese urban middle class started pursuing a better quality of life, engaging in different cultural, recreational and leisure activities as a way of reaching personal and spiritual fulfillment (Watanabe, 1999: 61).

As for domestic cultural policy, the 1980s and 1990s saw a tendency to return to old traditions, which are seen as "the foundation upon which future cultural development will be built" (Watanabe, 1999: 77). In fact, if we look at the Agency for Cultural Affairs' budget for 2017, we realize that only less than one third of it is allocated for the promotion of arts and culture, including the training of artists, while the other two thirds are designated for "enhancement of cultural properties protection" and "national cultural facilities" (Commissioner's Secretariat

Agency for Cultural Affairs, 2017). In turn, artistic and cultural creation is relegated to the Japan Arts Funds and private contributions.

Two decades after the promulgation of the Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties, the Japanese government launched the Law for the Promotion of Traditional Craft Industries (Densan Act) in 1974, under the responsibility of the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI). Until today, this law has designated 225 group products as Traditional Japanese Crafts, 31 of which are ceramics. According to its brochure, the Densan (Association for the Promotion of Traditional Craft Industries), created in 1975 as a consequence of the METI law, “actively promotes Japanese Handicrafts on a global scale and contributes to their market expansion”. The leaflet also states that for a craft to be recognized as Traditional Craft of Japan, it must fulfill all of the following conditions: to be used mainly in everyday life; to be primarily manufactured by hand; to be manufactured implementing traditional techniques of at 100 years old; to be produced with raw materials that have remained unchanged for at least 100 years; and to maintain a certain scale of production and be established as a local industry.

#### 4. Recent trends

The economic and social conditions of the postwar period led to a growing interest in Japan’s “soon to be lost” traditions and the objects that represented that vanishing past within the Japanese themselves. This moment coincided with a boom of the *nihonjinron* literature, prompting a search for the Japanese uniqueness in a moment of rapid economic growth and the consequent regain of confidence and national pride. During this time, the diffusion of Japanese culture abroad was made mainly through the marketing and selling of industrial and consumer products through a process that Burgess (2015) calls “economic diplomacy”, accompanied by the discourse of internationalization (*kokusaika*) from the part of the Japanese government during the 1980s as an attempt to control foreign images of the country.

However, the 1990s brought the end of the bubble economy to Japan, leading to economic deflation, instability and the consequent collapse of Japan as a manufacturing society. In particular, the change to a post-industrial model was expressed in the development of service and creative related industries from the mid-1990s, coinciding with the popularity of Japanese popular culture abroad, which peaked in the 2000s. Thus, in this context of economic instability, the Japanese government took advantage of the attractiveness of its popular culture to pursue national interests abroad through what Koichi Iwabuchi (2015) calls a “pragmatic and opportunistic” national branding cultural policy program known as “Cool Japan”. According to Burgess (2015: 113), the expression “Cool Japan” has been used by the government since 2005 but it was only in 2010 that the Creative Industries Promotion Office was established and, from 2013, it was included in prime-minister Shinzo Abe’s political strategy with a budget of 50 billion yen. Thus, in an attempt to expand its soft power in a context of increasing globalization, Japan shifted its focus from economic to cultural diplomacy, thus further influencing the cultural diffusion and imagining of Japan.

However, the Cool Japan program is not limited to *anime* and *manga*, including everything related to a “Japanese lifestyle”, from fashion to food, including traditional handicrafts and the so-called “Japanese sense of beauty”. In May 2017, as a part of its Creative Industries policy, the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry released a concept book titled *Wonder Nippon!*, which aims “to convey Japan’s unique sensibilities and values to the rest of the world as the foundation of commodities and services provided under the Cool Japan Initiative” (Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, n/d). The program describes several “traditional” Japanese values, many of which are supposedly derived from the Japanese relationship with nature, and its impact on craft production. This reveals how Japanese crafts and its associated ideas of Japanese craftsmanship are still deeply intertwined with what the state wants to convey to the world as Japanese culture, cultural values, tradition and identity.

Likewise, Japanese cultural events sponsored by the Japanese Embassy, other governmental agencies and many private organizations often rely on traditional performing arts and handicrafts to convey images of “Japaneseness” abroad. In her analysis of French images of Japan, Sylvie Guichard-Anguis (2001) has pointed out the role of “ephemeral” cultural productions such as those of the tea ceremony, flower arrangement and incense in the presentation of Japanese cultural values such as peace, harmony, tranquility and love of nature, which have been seen by the Japanese government as valuable resources of soft-power. Therefore, similarly to what happened in the World Exhibitions of the Meiji period, when the Japanese state deliberately made its first systematic efforts to promote a distinctive and often “self-exoticizing” image abroad, contemporary developments of Japan-related events in the global stage have been responsible for creating an appealing but also often stereotyped image of “Japaneseness” through the expansion of cultural exports.

Thus, as Goldstein-Gidoni (2005: 157) has argued, the concept of Japanese culture promoted by cultural events related to Japan abroad is strongly influenced by how Japanese culture is presented by the Japanese, both in Japan and in the structure of international organized contacts. However, it is becoming increasingly difficult for the Japanese government to control the national image of Japan abroad in a context of intensive globalization, since there are many actors besides the government who are involved in the creation of the images of the nation, such as private foundations, universities, museums, Japanese people abroad and foreigners living in Japan. While the “Cool Japan” project has spread Japanese culture abroad, creating what some authors have called a new vague of

“Japonisme”, reflected in the expansion of Japanese-language learning overseas, the exponential growth of overseas tourists and the rise of international students, the policy hasn’t kept up with the increasingly multicultural reality in contemporary Japanese society.

In fact, Watanabe<sup>2</sup> claims that overlooking the situation of foreigners in Japan might actually subvert the success of the “Cool Japan” policy. This is because, in today’s globalized world, foreigners living in Japan are in daily and direct contact with their families and friends overseas through Social Networking Services and thus are active actors in the creation and propagation of images of the country. In this sense, engaging with multicultural policies and acknowledging foreigner nationals as active contributors to Japanese society and culture and to the continuity, renewal and transmission of its cultural values and traditions, might not only be necessary but also a strategic endeavor from the part of the Japanese government if it wants to maintain the attractiveness of Japan abroad.

## 5. Conclusion

Throughout this article, we have examined some of the political projects, cultural negotiations and social relations involved in the construction of specific features associated to Japanese traditional crafts, which are a result of historical processes specific to Japanese modernity. The image of Japan centered on millenary traditions is still reflected in the image of its arts and crafts disseminated inside and outside of Japan today. However, many of these “traditional” traits are a product of Japanese elites’ culture and had little to do with most of Japan’s population until the modern era. It was only after the democratization of society motivated by Japan’s modernization that objects, rituals and practices that once belonged to the elite were officially institutionalized and started to circulate among the general population. This process was called as “samuraization” by Befu (1971: 50), who defined it as “the spread of the ideology of the ruling warrior class” amongst common people, and it was not restricted to the arts and crafts. It extended to food, religion, ethics, marriage, family organization and other sectors of Japanese life. In this process, some traditions were invented, others were restructured and an ancient shared past was redefined in order to legitimate the present. Even the popular art movements such as the folk and farmer crafts happened from top to bottom, being led by urban intellectuals and bureaucrats, who believed to know the best practices of production that craftsmen should follow. At the same time they contributed for the preservation and appreciation of these expressions, their paternalist and reforming character also led to stereotyping and standardization, homogenizing their identity in order to represent a “unique” local character while also being connected to national ideas of “Japaneseness”.

The purpose of this essay was thus to question concepts and ideas usually associated with Japanese traditional arts, showing how, rather than something fixed and innate, they are the result of historical, social and political projects, which include, amongst others: the dialogue between local production and Western standards and tastes; manifestations of wealth and social status; democratization of practices that once belonged to the elite; nationalist projects to promote traditional values; as well as local, individual and artistic specificities not mentioned here. For, as anywhere in the world, Japanese arts and crafts embrace multiple realities and features which vary depending on the region, period or social class, as well as the history, values and beliefs of the person or group that produces it. In this sense, besides the historical, social and cultural context in which different practices are developed or preferred, we should also look and give voice to specificities and subjectivities of groups and people whose material and artistic expressions are often overlooked as representative of a culture or nation. By understanding the ideologies intertwined with the construction of an identity of Japanese traditional arts and crafts, we can acknowledge the various cultural manifestations of a nation or group without resorting to simplifications that ignore the diversity and multiplicity of expressive forms, traditions and populations existing in Japan and worldwide.

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<sup>2</sup> Yashushi Watanabe in a seminar entitled *The Politics of Japan’s Soft Power*, held at Maison Franco-Japonaise, Tokyo, on November 17th, 2017.



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