The Political Economies of Japan's Crafts, Yesterday and Today

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INTRODUCTION

Craft requires several factors to thrive: a broad, restricted laboring class; discerning demand; political stability; limited ability to access outside materials and technology; and loose training strategies which establish basic skills but require individuals to develop more sophisticated techniques independently. As I will discuss, to a greater extent than most nations, Japan's history manifests these criteria, thus clarifying the reasons its crafts trades are recognized as achieving unique levels of development.

Craft has never been static, and its evolution has always meant that while some technologies emerge others, inevitably, disappear; this does not automatically mean the collapse of craft. As demand changes, so does expertise. The knowledge required to build the greatest structures of Japan's early Tokugawa era were no longer as necessary in the centuries which followed. Some techniques vanished – yet most critics do not see this evolution as suggesting that craft disappeared from the country during the seventeenth century.

However, today many of those factors which encouraged the flourishing of refinement in individually-managed, primarily manual building trades can no longer be said to exist in Japan. Yet craft in construction has not disappeared; the ornaments and finishes of both traditional and contemporary Japanese architecture often still require the efforts of tile makers, plasterers, *tatami* makers and carvers. The effects originally achieved by isolation and poverty are, to a lesser degree, maintained.

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF CRAFT: A BASIC FRAMEWORK

Economically, for craft to flourish, the nation-state must have a small, affluent connoisseur class and a larger class of poorly paid laborers. As one well-known author on Japan stated, "If we no longer have such craft... it is because money is no longer in the hands of the few."[1] Good craft requires discerning customers. The connoisseur class must be able to understand the nature of craft well enough to demand high quality work, challenge the best artisans to new levels of accomplishment, and have sufficient wealth to pay for work which is time-consuming.[2] The laboring class must have few opportunities for advancement or mobility – otherwise most crafters will transfer their efforts to other locations where pay is greater, or will take on work which is more profitable.[3] (The low remuneration for such work is often the basis for criticism of the architectural profession's continuing support for craft.) These two classes must also interact in a way which allows the connoisseur class to learn what is possible and to promote innovation.

The manner in which apprentices acquire skills and information is also important. If crafters rely on precisely transmitted information to learn necessary strategies of the craft (e.g., manuals or vocational coursework), then the apprentice learns by rote, without developing a capacity for invention. A looser approach to apprenticeship, setting standards and a basic outlook for work, is initially inefficient, but more effectively encourages the crafter to develop independence and to innovate. Additionally, and significant because of the conflicts between craft and manufactured production, production demand must include relatively simple articles which the young apprentice can produce while learning skills. Finally, if apprentices have an opportunity to learn their craft while still quite young, dexterity will also be higher.

Craft also benefits from paucity. If a wide range of building materials are available, then laborers will not concentrate their efforts on learning how to get the best from a single material or limited set. Paucity may also discourage rapid shifts in fashion and taste. Crafters can rely on a basic model or pattern for prolonged periods; this encourages the development of a cumulative body of knowledge and techniques. In addition, poverty or isolation discourage international trade, preventing crafters from broadly adopting new technologies as they spring up elsewhere on the globe. Instead, crafters must resolve challenges themselves, based on existing domestic technology.

Amassing the expertise needed for craft to advance also requires political continuity, allowing the transfer of information and the advancement of craft to take place over the course of time, without disruption by wars or other interference. This also ensures consistently available materials and tools.

SUSTAINING CRAFT IN EARLY MODERN JAPAN (1590-1868)

Although international recognition of Japan's crafts matured in the latter half of the nineteenth century, the flowering of craft dates to Japan's early modern era, particularly the building construction boom of the early sixteenth century. The period from the end of the sixteenth century through the middle of the nineteenth is sometimes called the "Age of Craftsmen" because of the quality of refinement which was achieved. In earlier periods, Japanese political leaders and nobility often relied on the best available labor, often from China and Korea, sometimes even forcibly relocating whole communities of artisans to Japan.' However, from the beginning of the sixteenth century, as Japan turned inward, it was necessary to encourage domestic labor to take over this role. As I will demonstrate, the political and economic factors of this period correlate strongly with the broad criteria for craft which I listed above.

During this period, the government used legal and economic means to grimly maintain a large laboring class and a tiny connoisseur class. Beginning with the 1591 Edict Restricting Change of Status, social classes were prescribed and hermetic, with virtually no opportunities for moving between ranks.[5] Society broke down into nobility, warrior, merchant, artisan and peasant classes. Custom and regulation tied families, except for the warrior class, to their communities. Yoked by inflexible circumstances to both location and work, artisans were generally not well compensated.

Since trades were hereditary and families poor, there was a strong incentive to begin learning crafts at a young age. Nonetheless, in Japan, apprentices spent the initial years of formal training in mundane chores, and even when training commenced, it was rudimentary. Apprenticeship conventionally took ten years or more. Furthermore, supervisors never taught sophisticated techniques. Instead, the apprentice learned by stealthy observation over time or, in Japanese, *nusumi-geiko* — "stealing skill." This ultimately encouraged an ability to innovate, as proficiency advanced through trial-and-error.

Discriminating consumers of craft actually came from several classes. Activities of the nobility concentrated on refined culture. The merchant class, over time, accumulated much of the country's wealth and consequently, its purchasing power.[6] The warrior class held political strength and was able to requisition labor. Still, the pool of connoisseurs was not large. Warriors, for example, accounted for only about five percent of the population; most were poor and had little political power. The nobility, at the time that the system was repealed in the middle of the nineteenth century, accounted for less than two percent of the population.'

As for material limitations, these were established both by fiat and by nature. Throughout the period, laws which delineated consumption by class grew increasingly restrictive. The government specified appropriate construction materials, building size, and architectural elements; restrictions also extended to clothing, foods, and even the use of picayune materials such as hair combs and tobacco pouches.[8] From the eighteenth century on, the country faced severe depletion of timber and metals; these laws, at least in their most repressive form, may have been a response to Japan's ecological collapse.[9] The result was that crafters learned to parsimoniously exploit raw materials. Additionally, the legal restrictions related to merchants' rights of consumption encouraged inventive demands on crafters, as those who were wealthy attempted to circumvent these regulations.

The early modern period was also a time of enforced trade isolation, when the Shogunal government maintained strong control over foreign goods and information. Western technology, which had begun to move towards industrialization, was not completely unknown. It was, however, politically suspect and dissemination was rare and potentially dangerous. Even outside trade with Asian nations, which continued, was closely observed. Thus, advancement of crafts developed internally, with few introductions of new materials or outside technologies.

The age may appear harsh: heavy taxes, circumscribed spatial and class mobility, environmental collapse. However, this was also an unusually prolonged period of civic consolidation and amity, following over one hundred years of civil war. Heavy bureaucratic authority maintained political stability from the early seventeenth century through the mid-nineteenth century. As noted earlier, such constancy ensured that the transmission of knowledge and the development of craft remained undisrupted.

In the end, then, it is not surprising that sophisticated craft traditions are widely associated with Japan; the environment fostered craft development to a degree found only seldom.

AN EMERGING CONTENDER (1868-1945)

The situation changed significantly in the mid-nineteenth century, however. Weakened internal control allowed for a political and social revolution, now called the Meiji Restoration, and Japan re-established international trade with the world. In doing so, the country became aware of its relative lack of power at a time when Britain was already dominating the much larger nation of China. Japan's government felt that it must promote Westernization as a way to catch up; elites aggressively adopted Western technologies and attitudes.

Conflicts between craft and manufacturing appeared in Japan as new, Western objectives related to efficiency were introduced in the middle of the nineteenth century. Primitive industrialization existed earlier, but goals differed; in particular, labor-saving was never seen as an argument in favor of industrialization. But as Japan joined the international community, manufacturing began to supplant handicraft in routine production, just as it had elsewhere during the Industrial Revolution. Although today most artisans comfortably rely on some combination of machine-based and traditional technologies, the awareness that machine-based approaches to construction were introduced from abroad caused adoption of foreign technologies to lag considerably, in some cases

even until the time of the U.S. occupation of Japan in the mid-twentieth century.

There are as well, understandably, points of conflict between manufacturing and craft. Lacking pervasive industrialization, most materials of daily life are handmade. Manufacturing thus usurps a portion of the original craft market, because basic commodities can be produced more cheaply without significant qualitative differences. Since industrial production is most efficient in the manufacture of simpler articles, apprentices are also less able to rely on mundane work to develop basic skills. Furthermore, the natural education of consumers, developed through interactions with crafters, is weakened.

Japan's restoration of open, international trade also meant that formidable challenges were no longer internally resolved, advancing craft. Instead, the possibility existed that foreign technologies or materials might offer solutions. Japan remained, however, poor. While the country sometimes imported new materials or developed the ability to produce them domestically, a heavy dependence on traditional construction approaches prevailed.

Interestingly, during this time the Meiji government established limits to the period of apprenticeship, generally five years or less, and educational trends emerged which caused the starting age of apprenticeship to rise. Both conditions remain true today; apprenticeship is thus one half (or less) of its traditional length and occurs later in one's life, when dexterity may be more difficult to acquire. The use of construction and trade manuals also proliferated during the Meiji Era, perhaps in response to incomplete apprenticeship terms, but nonetheless discouraging the development of ingenuity. As political will favored manufacturing, the negative effects of these changes on craft may have been deliberate. Ultimately, the Meiji era emerged for the most part as a time of challenge to crafts traditions. Perhaps the most notable example of the rejection of Japan's indigenous building trades is the early twentieth-century "restoration" of Todaiji, openly reliant on steel.[10]

There were, however, important advocates for traditional craft as well; as many were Westerners and Western intellectual movements were being avidly studied, their voices served to mitigate the rush towards Western technologies. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, foreign travelers were just beginning to freely visit Japan. The country's craft traditions were thus still vigorous at a time when the erosion of craft in the West was acutely debated. Many observers wrote favorably of Japan's crafts, particularly pointing to differences between the debased building trades in their own countries and Japan's continued refinement. In a not uncommon vein, Edward Morse, in a classic text on domestic architecture written in the early 1880s, stated that "A somewhat extended experience with the common everyday carpenter at home [in the U.S.] leads me to say, without fear of contradiction, that in matters pertaining to craft the Japanese carpenters are superior..."[11] German and English intellectuals had, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, actively attempted to promote the revival of craft in the West; although arduous, Hermann Muthesius, Bruno Taut, and others influenced by the Arts and Crafts also visited Japan.

Not surprisingly, these visitors affected Japanese intellectual trends, fostering, for example, the work of the Japanese White Birch Society, which included Bernard Leach and Soetsu Yanagi. Taut was also able to directly address the Japanese people with his published observations, which were translated into Japanese and widely read. Philosophically, these Western intellectuals had come to emphasize the home as a place where crafts traditions remained important. In doing so, they were able to inspire the somewhat schizophrenic Japanese attitude towards Western innovations. Japanese people eagerly embraced the modern, Western offices, schools and railroad stations which changed public life, while zealously maintaining domestic traditions.

CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT (1945 – TODAY)

Today, many of the normal factors necessary for craft to thrive no longer persist in Japan. Instead of a small elite and a large laboring population, since World War II there exists a broad middle class. By international standards, to be sure, the middle class is affluent – but, as noted earlier, connoisseurship requires both affluence and judgment. The chief method of developing discernment is through the interactions between crafter and consumer; opportunities for such interactions declined with increased purchasing of manufactured goods. Nonetheless, while little discriminating taste exists among the middle classes, there has been adiffuse, continuing acceptance of tradition and craft in residential and leisure construction. Because of this, Japan's experience today does not parallel the era of craft degradation in the West, when the middle classes for the most part abandoned artisans' labor in favor of manufactured materials. It is, however, very often a professional consultant, rather than a consumer, who interacts with and challenges the crafter.

Since architects are today the chief connoisseurs of building-related craft (there continues, as well, to be a small elite which is able to assess the value of craft), the nature of the challenges presented to artisans has changed. Architects appeal to a wider audience: the international press, the professional community, and future clients. Japan's most cosmopolitan architects naturally reflect the concerns and ideals influencing architects in other parts of the world; movements such as phenomenology or critical regionalism, which integrate crafted production, are also conspicuous in Japan. There is, however, a more liberal attitude towards the incorporation of traditional materials or forms in contemporary work. Japanese architects whose oeuvre is decidedly modern feel comfortable employing tile, plaster, or tatami when they consider it appropriate, and the more catholic intellectual environment allows them to do so without establishing craft as an on-going focus for work.

Where architects simply rely on conventional incorporations of handicraft in a building, they forestall current market erosion. They may not, however, assist crafters in establish-

ing practices which offer successful strategies for adaptation to the contemporary market. Rather, such an approach tends to concentrate on a few accepted practices and allows many skills to atrophy, neglecting overall versatility in the trades. Some Japanese designers more accurately mirror the traditional role of the connoisseur by creating new challenges to the crafter in the context of on-going collaborations with specific individuals. To do so effectively requires trust, long-term knowledge of collaborators' ability, and an openness to diffused responsibility. Over time, and as a result of the work of these architects, some crafters have also come to target architects as the primary connoisseur class.

Generally, though, trade organizations in Japan have addressed the disappearance of the connoisseur class by attempting to educate middle-class consumers and foreign tourists.[12] Many of these organizations employ crafters to demonstrate their work in exhibits, which can also benefit the trade as a whole by increasing the opportunity for inexperienced apprentices to practice routine, basic skills, but seems otherwise ineffective.

While the connoisseur class has been supplanted, changes in class structure still have a profound impact because the laboring class has dwindled. Today, few people in Japan would describe their opportunities for economic advancement as limited. Most of the population aspires to work which is, in comparison to crafts, more profitable, less exacting and interminable, and where proficiency is not so elusive. Thus, most crafters tend to be people who trained nearer to World War II; many are approaching advanced age and few are taking their place.[13] Apprentices who, because of shifts in educational norms generally do not take on a trade until they are in their late teens or early twenties, are often impatient to begin families and establish independence. They have a strong inclination towards shorter periods of training and expect higher pay even in the initial stages of apprenticeship, when their productivity is very low.

The declining supply of skilled workers and the increasing age of those who remain active has been an important catalyst for action by the large construction companies, which have established efforts to improve apprenticeship. Wages are increasingly competitive and basic skills are being taught in subsidized vocational programs, shifting the financial burden of training from individual studios to the industry as a whole. These programs also differ from traditional apprenticeships in that they utilize abstract intellectual principles, not manual learning, as a departure point. They thus begin from a wider understanding of diverse construction materials and technologies.

Yet these approaches to apprenticeship, as well as nation's affluence, also present other challenges to craft. Expanded access to a range of technologies can discourage a narrow but complete understanding of the properties and opportunities offered by a single material, the hallmark of refined craft. Advanced technology is most valuable where artisans use it within a limited range, e.g., determining the brittleness or strength of a material with greater precision through scientific testing, as a way of reinforcing intuition. Where technologies offer alternative solutions which do not fit within the original approach or which reduce innate knowing, they may deplete expertise; Japanese joinery, which has become much simpler due to the use of metal fasteners and the employment of numerically controlled computers in rough carving, illustrates this point effectively.

Additionally, Japan has the wealth to purchase materials from around the world and faces dwindling availability of those materials which were traditionally used. The country imports new species of wood from Taiwan and Indonesia, differing qualities of steel and aggregates from Korea, and even North American stone. Crafters, prepared to innovate, are open to the use of any materials and technologies available – but the usable palette has become too broad to promote the intimate knowledge of materials identified with craft. To a certain extent convention has meant that crafters do not stray too far from the original constituent elements of the trade – but they do not always have a choice. Japan as a nation has become so industrialized that many of the raw materials which building trades traditionally employed, such as riverbed reeds for *tatami* or clay for roof tiles, have become difficult or impossible to obtain in appropriate form. Demand level for most crafts is not high enough to encourage commercial harvesting, and thus crafters are being forced to seek out alternate materials. Material substitution may in fact already be the norm in most traditional trades. This is a key point for those concerned about the changes in craft today, and one which seems beyond the reach of the construction industry.

Industrial production and international exchange have also led to standardization and a tighter emphasis on component interchangeability in many building trades. In order to make hand-crafted pieces compatible with manufactured components, artisans have had to place greater emphasis on precision and abandon local measures. The standardization of production then creates greater potential for imported or manufactured substitutes. While the question is outside the realm of this paper, global production and international trade may be introducing at a larger scale the model of a large laboring population supporting a smaller consumer group. This model would be imperfect, though, because consumers no longer learn the opportunities of crafted work, nor are they able to directly promote innovation.

CRAFT TOMORROW

Theexecution of Japanese architecture today, both traditional and contemporary, still includes indigenous building crafts. For much of the population, incorporation of customary materials and construction in residential environments remains an important way to recognize heritage. As long as this remains true, some of the effects originally achieved by isolation and paucity will be artificially maintained, allowing craft to continue as a viable part of Japan's construction industry.

However, demand alone is not sufficient to assure that

refined craft is maintained. New methods of promoting skills and versatility through sophisticated connoisseurship is also important; the design community, although not a conventional source for this demand, is a strong alternative to the connoisseurs of yesterday. Training programs, if focused on strategies which promote adaptability and a regard for artificial material limitations, may effectively supplant apprenticeship, albeit with some loss of manual proficiency because the starting age is delayed.

What will be forfeited? Society as a whole benefits from the loss of some crafts, especially those which are dangerous or overly dull. Peeling logs with a *chouna,* a Japanese adze, a laborer struck downward and in; the careless worker would lose his feet – and perhaps his life. Is the beauty of the finished surface produced (one still called for by some contemporary architects) worth this danger? Similarly, it was not so long ago that *anaya* spent their days making holes. The routine of doing so did not prepare them for more advanced efforts, such as making a mortise and tenon. They simply performed the activity today done by drills. Few would justify asking an inexperienced person to take up these practices today.

By recognizing those factors which supported the development of craft and concentrating on what should not be lost – specific technologies, proficiency with certain materials, broad versatility, an openness to innovation – and developing complementary and coordinated strategies between architects, artisans, and the construction industry as a whole, not only can craft be maintained, but it can perhaps even be reinvigorated.

NOTES

[1] Donald Richie, *Design and Craftsmanship of Japan: Stone, Metal, Fibers and Fabrics, Bamboo* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., undated.) p. xi

[2] See Thomas F. Judge, *Edo Craftsmen: Master Artisans of Old Tokyo* (New York & Tokyo: Weatherhill, 1994), p. 91 or James Marston Fitch, *Architecture and the Esthetics of Plenty* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1985), p. 270.

[3] Among the reviewers of this paper, one found the use of the word "crafter" awkward, assuming I was attempting to avoid recognizing crafts labor as gendered. In fact the opposite is true. While most of the final stages of the work were traditionally done by men, women shared in many critical tasks related to craft, including the initial selection and processing of materials for *tatarni* and *sudare,* and the processing of clay for tiles. The word for crafter in Japanese, *shokunin,* is similarly without gender references.

[4] One village of Japanese wood carvers I have visited, for example, uses a notably Chinese pronunciation of its name, rather than Japanese pronunciations. Although this village dates back over three hundred years, it also is remarkably similarities to villages I have visited in Taiwan, and has only one counterpart I have found in Japan.

[5] See, for example, Herman Ooms, *Tokugawa Village Practice: Class, Status, Power, Law* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1996). The 1591 Edict Restricting Change of Status is first mentioned on p. 126.

[6] S. N. Eisenstadt, *Japanese Civilization: A Comparative View* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 71.

[7] *Japan, an Illustrated Encyclopedia,* Kodansha Ltd., s.v. *shi-no-ko-sho.*

[8] Conrad Totman, *Early Modern Japan* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1993), p.136.

[9] Ibid., p. 226. Totman's book *The Lumber Industry in Earl?. Modern Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1995) is also recommended.

[10] This point is one made by William Coaldrake, *Architecture and Authority in Japan* (London & New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 245-247. Coaldrake's earlier book, *The Way of the Carpenter* (New York & Tokyo: Weatherhill, 1990) should also be noted as an outstanding work on the topic of traditional Japanese construction.

[11] Edward Morse, *Japanese Homes and their Surroundings* (New York & Tokyo: Charles Tuttle & Co.), p. 35.

[12] **A** similar attempt occurred through the publication by Gustav Stickley's *The Craftsman* during the early nineteenth century in the United States. This point is noted by Malcolm McCullough, *Abstracting Craft: The Practiced Digital Hand* (Cambridge, Massachusetts & London: The MIT Press, 1997), p. 244.

[13] See further discussion of the government position on this problem in the annually-published *White Paper on Labor (Rodo Hakusho)* and *White Paper on Construction (Kensetsu Hakusho),* especially volumes for the early 1990s, published in both English and Japanese by the Ministry of Labor and by the Ministry of Construction of the Japanese Government.