



Kim Brandt. *Kingdom of Beauty: Mingei and the Politics of Folk Art in Imperial Japan*

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KIM BRANDT'S *Kingdom of Beauty* is a monumental publication. It is a fresh narrative of the Japanese Mingei movement 民芸運動 during the period and in the context of Japan's military regime. The Mingei movement emerged in the 1920s as an aesthetic appreciation of the beauty of folk crafts, and continues to the present day. From the early 1930s, it began to promote the aesthetic theory of Yanagi Muneyoshi 柳宗悦 (also called Sōetsu: 1889–1961); Yanagi claimed that the beauty of humble everyday craft made by “nameless” producers for use by ordinary people surpasses any other kind of beauty created by individuals. In order to prove his point, Yanagi built up a large collection of craftworks which he selected through his celebrated discriminating eye. The collection has been housed since 1936 in the Japan Folkcrafts Museum (Mingeikan 民芸館) in Komaba, Tokyo, attracting a large number of Japanese and foreign visitors. The Japan Mingei Association (Nihon Mingei Kyōkai 日本民芸協会), established in 1934, has promoted Yanagi's ideas and supported new craft producers who share Yanagi's aesthetic. The concept of Mingei was disseminated in the English-speaking world through the writings and lectures of the English potter Bernard Leach (1887–1979) as well as by Yanagi.

The concept of Mingei, Yanagi, and the movement itself have been studied in a wide range of academic disciplines including anthropology, cultural studies, the history of thought, and craft history. Of these, accounts of the movement itself, particularly in wartime, are relatively few. In her book, Brandt addresses almost every issue that previous narratives of the movement either overlooked or shied away from. She not only addresses these, but illuminates them through persuasive arguments.

Obviously, the most sensitive issue concerning the Mingei movement of this period is, to put it bluntly, whether or not Yanagi willingly co-operated with the military government and its policies. Yanagi is often described as having been against Japan's nationalist policies. This was based, typically, on his clashes with the authorities: first when he successfully saved Korea's Kōka Gate (Kwanghwamun 光化門) from demolition by the Japanese colonial authorities in the 1920s, and again in “the Okinawan dialect debate” in the late 1930s when he defended the Okinawans' right to maintain their own language. So it seemed odd that, between 1939 and 1944 Yanagi and other members of the Mingei Association travelled around regional Japan and occupied territories collecting, researching and promoting Mingei under the New Order (Shintaisei 新体制) regime, when the only activities that the regime permitted were those positively supportive of it. Kikuchi Yūko's interpretation is that Yanagi's ideas on folk craft and regional culture fit

into the nationalist agenda of the time: she claims that there “was mutual support between Yanagi and Japanese imperialism in their respective developments, as well as Yanagi’s obvious Japanocentric standpoint as both a coloniser and a subject in his enterprise to discover and build knowledge of other cultures” (KIKUCHI 2004, 194). Her assertions, which are reasonable if somewhat provocative, inevitably attracted resentment from those who were close to the Mingei Association.¹

Kikuchi’s iconoclastic reinterpretation of Yanagi places him in a broader cultural context, yet does not fully explain how his apparent cooperation with (if not “support” of) the nationalist military government can be reconciled with Yanagi’s other “anti-authoritarian” stand, especially over “the Okinawan dialect debate.” On the other side, Mizuo Hiroshi, Yanagi’s biographer, portrays him as one who was fundamentally anti-war, and claims that his Mingei movement was “resistance against the war.” His explanation of Yanagi’s wartime Mingei activities is that Yanagi did not want to miss an opportunity that was provided by the authorities to “realize his ideal,” and that he “took advantage of” (*sakate ni totte*) the New Order to further his cause (MIZUO 1992, 212–15). Mizuo’s rather awkward argument (212) is based on a view that Yanagi’s defense of regional culture was in direct opposition to the nationalist policy of homogenization. However, Nakami Mari, who also portrays Yanagi as a committed pacifist, points out that the promotion of regional culture was actually part of the nationalist agenda: a strategy against the so-called “bad influence” of the liberalism and utilitarianism that accompanied Western ideas (NAKAMI 2003, 241). Her analysis of Yanagi’s ideological stance explains his personal position in the wartime environment. Nevertheless, her discussions, like Mizuo’s, are limited to Yanagi the individual, and as such they leave many questions about the actions of the Mingei activists as a group unanswered.

In *Kingdom of Beauty*, Brandt makes sense of it all. She does this by making “the other force”—the nationalist/fascist regime—a visible entity with its own ideology, trajectory, internal contradictions and shifting priorities: and she does this with remarkable dexterity, sifting and negotiating extensive official and personal documents. As a result, one can clearly see the regime’s dealings with Mingei ideals as an inevitable as well as opportunistic engagement, quite distinct from Yanagi’s personal beliefs or even intentions. I am not a student of cultural studies, and am not qualified to comment on the validity of theories which Brandt employs in her arguments. As a student of the Mingei movement, however, to me *Kingdom of Beauty* not only answers most of the vexing questions I had long held but also opens up a whole new perspective from which to see the movement.

Brandt begins with examining the emergence of Yanagi’s and others’ interest in folk craft (Mingei) within the context of modern Japan; she shows that Yanagi’s thoughts on Mingei were shaped, progressively, by his growing awareness of Japan’s relation to the West and to its colonies, as well as of modernity and an imagined past. In so doing, she elucidates the complex issues inherent in Yanagi’s “discoveries”—of Korean folk objects, the Mokujiki Shōnin 木喰上人 carvings and *getemono* 下手物 Mingei. This initial analysis helps the reader follow her accounts through to the Mingei activism of the late 1930s, and to understand the ways in which Yanagi’s ideas meshed with the ambitions of Japan’s wartime regime.

Given the extensive scope of her narrative, perhaps it is inevitable that *Kingdom of Beauty* is not an introduction to the Mingei movement, but rather a conclusion to the large body of literature on it. Even so, apart from some minor points on which I disagree with the author (mostly art historical), I feel more explanations/clarifications are required in some places. I will just mention here my major concern. I feel that the nature of the shift within the movement from “antiquarian/hobbyist” to “social reformist” needs to be more clearly explained in terms of changed power structure within the movement: I am specifically thinking of Yoshida Shōya’s 吉田璋也 ideas and approaches to the movement. Brandt briefly gives Yoshida’s profile in relation to the new Mingei production in Tottori in the early 1930s, but I believe the roles played by Yoshida and his close associates, such as Shikiba Ryūzaburō 式場隆三郎, were critical in determining the group’s direction thereafter. After all, when Yoshida and Shikiba began *Gekkan Mingei* in 1939, in the editorial they explained its role in relation to Kōgei as one of the “machine gun” to the “canon,” a notion quite alien to Yanagi who was known to have detested all weapons.² Also, Brandt points out but does not question (136) why there were two magazines for one association. Addressing this question would help us to recognize the distinctive sets of ideas and activities represented by the two publications.

But more importantly, *Kingdom of Beauty* is truly the most compelling study of Mingei I have read: it not only answers questions hitherto unanswered, but also provides useful tools for the future study of Mingei, particularly in the context of today’s increasingly globalizing world. And last but not least, I am deeply struck by the manner in which the author has approached often contentious topics with unabated tenacity, integrity, and sincerity.

NOTES

1. See for example, HUGHES and HUGHES 1998, 53. The article is their report of a symposium held in conjunction with an exhibition of Hamada Shōji’s works at Ditchling, Sussex, at which Kikuchi presented a paper prior to the publication of *Japanese Modernisation and Mingei Theory*.

2. The Mingei group published the magazine *Kōgei* 工芸 (Craft) from 1931. Each issue of *Kōgei* was produced as a craftwork in its own right. *Kōgei* was joined by another, popularized magazine called *Gekkan mingei* 月刊民芸 [Mingei monthly] in 1939. The publication of both magazines was interrupted as the war intensified, in 1943 and 1944 respectively.

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