

Reviving Japanese “Traditional” Industries: Prospects and Strategies for Asian Regional Integration.

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Abstract

In the 1980s, most Asian traditional craft industries severely declined, deeply impacted by the process of globalization (Robertson, 1997; Tomlinson 2001). Japan’s craft industry was no exception, and in looking for new ways to expand the shrinking domestic market for craft, Japan’s Ministry of Economy Trade and Industry (METI) began to look for opportunities outside its borders. Several prospects emerged in the form of cooperative and developmental craft exchanges designed to raise awareness and create appreciation of traditional commodities among Asian neighbors.

While research to date concerning Asian regional integration has focused mainly economic analysis (Fujita, 2008) this paper argues that focusing the social and cultural benefits of such craft cooperatives is a more effective means for successful regional integration and the advancement of Asian community building. Furthermore as traditional crafts are material objects that can represent aspects of local, ethnic or cultural identity, and therefore, symbolize the not only the economic, but also social and cultural elements of a society (McCracken, 1990; Tilley, 2003) they can be part of the discourse of grassroots integration focused away from the elite.

This paper investigates the case of one of these of a regional community initiative Japan’s Kiso Lacquerware Technical Cooperation Project and educational exchange with the Union of Myanmar in 1998. As an initial investigation this paper will suggest preliminary strategies for regional cooperation and the survival of traditional industries.

Introduction

In the 1980s, most Asian traditional crafts industries severely declined, deeply impacted by the process of globalization.¹ For most developed nations the cause of the decline were, the rapid economic growth of the post-World War II era, the introduction of new technologies, and the full-fledged mass production of products made of new synthetic materials. Japanese traditional goods were no exception, though still produced today, those goods have been relegated as traditional crafts and their production and distribution domestically is in a state of crisis. This is confirmed in a statement according to Takuya in 2004, a member of the Association for the Promotion of Traditional Crafts Industries and researcher at the School of Policy Studies, Hosei University,

¹ Robertson, Roland and Anthony D. King. 1997. Social theory, cultural relativity and the problem of globality. In *Culture, globalization and the world-system: Contemporary conditions for the representation of identity*, ed. Anonymous:69. Minneapolis: U Minnesota Press. and Tomlinson, Alan and Christopher Young. 2006. *National identity and global sports events : Culture, politics, and spectacle in the olympics and the football world cup*. Ed Anonymous. Suny series on sport, culture, and social relations; suny series on sport, culture, and social relations. Albany: State University of New York Press.

“One major factor behind the slump the demand for traditional crafts in Japan is the preference towards homogenization that has affected culture and lifestyle as a result of expanded globalization. The mass production and marketing of standardized industrial products at low prices, the role of traditional crafts in daily life continues to decline, with demand domestically for traditional crafts dithering, new avenues of distribution and consumption must be found”.²

This paper argues, that those traditional crafts are not only a commodity to be viewed in an economic light, but could be used as a tool and a strategy to enhance the process of Asian regional integration; to build more than just an economic community. The production of traditional crafts and the cooperation of craftsperson’s could be the foundation for mutual understanding of values and culture thereby increasing Japan’s opportunities for regional integration activities.

Comparable craft traditions exist for lacquerware, ceramic, and textiles in Asian countries and regions such as China, Taiwan, South Korea, Thailand, Myanmar, Vietnam and Bhutan. Historically some of these craft production processes have been imported and exported to Japan from these countries. Japan possesses a rich and diverse craft industry, which in sharing with the region could be the a bridge of common values in an effort to build more than just an economic region. I propose that these types of craft cooperation initiatives could be regarded as the core of integration within the Asian region and will contribute to better enhancement of social and economic development of the member countries through focusing on craft as agent of development and of social cohesion. It is obvious that people-to-people contact is an important bond and basis for cooperation between states and thus, diversified cultural exchanges together with Japan’s neighboring countries should be undertaken.

In order to more fully explore this issue, I will first explore cultural theoretical approaches to globalization and regionalism, where it is argued that much of the scholarly literature focuses on processes of regionalism as related to economics³. Then I describe craft as something with an identity and value of is own and as a tool for integration. Finally

² Takuya, Urushihara. 2004. The prospects for traditional Japanese crafts. *Economy, Culture & History Japan Spotlight Bimonthly* 23, no. 4: 48-49.

³ Fujita, Masahisa. *Economic integration in East Asia : perspectives from spatial and neoclassical economics*. Cheltenham : Edward Elgar, 2008.

I will provide a brief review of the current situation of traditional craft in Japan, and provide strategies for integration based on my initial investigation of a the case of the Kiso Lacquerware Cooperative with Myanmar.

Theoretical Approach

Where is the “Social” in Asian Regional Integration?

The volume of literature on Asian Regional Integration to date emphasizes the role that economic features in regionalism. Higgots⁴ for instance, defines regionalization as a process of “integration that arise from markets, private trade and investments flows and from the policies and decisions of companies rather than the predetermined plans of national or local governments”, while Breslin⁵ observes that regionalization involves “processes by which societies and economies become integrated – particularly but not only in the economic sphere”.

However to a sociologist such as myself, interested in the construction of societies and regions, which have the potential embrace a common set of values, a genuine lack of discourse on the non-economic aspects of regional integration appears to exist. Few scholars’ have addressed how regions with economic and political arrangements⁶, have enhanced their social cohesion, and or determined issues of relations concerning distinct cultural groups.⁷

In sociology cultural approaches to economic growth are not new, especially in comparative research. Max Weber drew conclusions regarding the relative strengths of religious cultures for economic expansion. However, in the wake of the Cold War and the rapid rate of change in the ‘age of globalization, cultural discourse has become particularly popular and controversial. With in sociology there are two broad arguments.

⁴Higgott, Richard. 2006. The Theory and Practice of Region: The Changing Global Context. In Douglas Webber and Bertrand Fort; Eds. *Regional Integration in East Asia and Europe: Convergence or Divergence*. Centre for the Study of Globalization and Regionalization. New York: Routledge. p.24.

⁵ Breslin, Shaun. 2006. Theorising East Asian Regionalism(s). In Melissa Curley and Nicholas Thomas; editors. *Advancing East Asian Regionalism*. Abingdon, Oxon, UK ; New York: Routledge. p.27 - 30.

⁶ For example, Lawrence E. Harrison, *Who Prospers? How Cultural Values Shape Economic and Political Success* (New York: Basic Books, 1992); Thomas Sowell, *Race and Culture: A World View* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).

⁷ Ibid.

First, with the weakening of global and politic ideological conflicts, economic and political regionalism has become more common. Of course this has not been immediate but a process of gradual development over a number of decades.⁸ Parallel to this ideological debate, a cultural debate has arisen and has been attached to various political and economic indicators, but it has also been argued to bolster economic and political friction. For example Huntington states;

“the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural... [The] principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations. The clash of civilizations will dominate global politics.”⁹

Therefore, socially or culturally based arguments often underscore the homogenizing consequences of the forces of globalization. In some cases, they highlight the unpleasant affects of this process; that is regions and the people in them become more aware of their differences as cultures interact with each other. They hypothesize that this has been heightened by a resurgence of traditional identity and values resulting from the uncertainties of socio-political change in some societies.

The second, more popular argument holds that culture and regional values are declining as a result of domestic and international politics in the context of the pressures of globalization¹⁰. The process is discouraging traditional values and institutions, while producing a convergence of cultures through communication, travel and trade: a fledgling homogenizing “world culture” as a consequence of increasing shared experiences or as explained by Havel, creating an “amalgamation of cultures” in a “transcendent global ethos.”¹¹ Therefore scholars’ believe that the meeting of political and economic practices and the spread of democracy have similarly led to arguments of which hold the suggestion for cultural differences. Fukuyama argues that the spread of free market economics and

⁸ Wallerstein, Immanuel Maurice. 2004. *World-systems analysis: An introduction*. Ed Anonymous. Durham: Duke University Press.

⁹ Samuel P. Huntington, "The West: Unique, Not Universal", *Foreign Affairs* 75, no. 6 (1996).

¹⁰ Befu, Harumi. 2003. Globalization theory from the bottom up: Japan's contribution. *Japanese Studies* 23, no. 1: 3-22.

¹¹ Vaclav Havel, "The Need for Transcendence in the Postmodern World", *The Futurist*, July-August 1995, p. 47.

democratic politics is a process, which “guarantees an increasing homogenization of all human societies, regardless of their historical origins or cultural inheritances”.¹²

What Function Could Social And Cultural Values Serve For The Prospect Of Integration?

The answer to this question is still underexplored and seems ambiguous at best. What seems to be unclear is the prospect of creating a common social or cultural community, what is necessary to define or even understand what those values or commonalities might be? This quest for understanding what common ‘Asian Values’ might be is central I believe to the lack of social or cultural argument. The concept of common ‘Asian values’ relies upon a number of assumptions, which have serious methodological and practical problems. In fact the phrase ‘Asian values’ implies that the social, economic and political characteristics of certain Asian countries is based upon a shared value system which is identifiable and distinct and which transcends national, religious and ideological differences. The arguments presented thus far in the literature present Asia is presented as a value system in the context of an East-West dichotomy. Those arguments maintain that cultural values have underpinned the growth rates of Asian countries and conditioned the orderly social and political characteristics of the region.¹³

The role of common values, and identity and regionalism, however, is still a matter of debate. Scholars such as Leifer, who adopted a perspective on formed on international relations, minimized the importance of values, seeing them as being “convenient instruments of states.”¹⁴ In spite of this view, the importance of the social and the cultural or common values cannot be easily discounted with respect to the ideas of Asian regional integration. Early functionalists like Karl Deutsch¹⁵ identified the formation of common identity as the driving force of regional institutional integration.

Regional integration appears to occur at the level of the official and elite, where value struggles seem to most often the economic aspect of regionalism. This effectively

¹² Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Praeger, 1992), p. xiv.

¹³ Befu, Harumi. 2003. Globalization theory from the bottom up: Japan's contribution. *Japanese Studies* 23, no. 1: 3-22.

¹⁴ Liow, Joseph & Emmers, Ralf. 2006. Introduction. In Joseph Liow & Ralf Emmers; eds. *Order and Security in Southeast Asia: Essay in Memory of Michael Leifer*. New York: Routledge Order.

¹⁵ Jehoon, Park; T. J. Pempel; Gerard, Roland. 2008. *Political Economy of Northeast Asian Regionalism: Political Conflict and Economic Integration*. Edward Elgar. p. 52.

dismisses the concept of a grassroots level regionalism, or regionalism among the people. The tendency is to emphasize the role that economic aspects play in regionalism. Higgots¹⁶ for instance, defines regionalization as a process of “integration that arise from markets, private trade and investments flows and from the policies and decisions of companies rather than the predetermined plans of national or local governments.

While I recognize that it may be naive to overstate the importance of identity and values in the process of regionalism and regionalization. It is understood that regional organizations, especially in Asia, are forged due to the national interests its regional members that take into account first and foremost their economic and geopolitical interests of the region rather than a sense of shared belonging. Though, these interests are often economic in nature, which explains why the economic aspects of regionalization and regionalism are often stressed. Nonetheless, citizens of individual member states who distrust or hold negative attitudes towards one another will make it difficult for regional organizations to work effectively on nontraditional security issues that carry a human dimension – for example the case of illegal migration or transnational crime. According to Acharya¹⁷ writing in the context of Southeast Asia observes:

“The success or failure of Southeast Asian regionalism is explained not just by the great power balance, but also by ideational forces; including norms and the politics of identity building. Norms and identity matter; while they are not the only determinants of regionalism in Southeast Asia, they are a central determinant...while norms do matter, and they do not necessarily matter in a positive, progressive manner. They can matter negatively, by creating barriers or obstacles to change.”

In summary, I suggest then that examining regional integration requires a comprehensive, balanced analysis of its formal and informal characteristics. At the institutional level, which addresses “official” aspects like economy and security, while the latter refers to as Rumley suggests, “a sense of belonging or feelings of community in a

¹⁶ Higgott, Richard. 2006. The Theory and Practice of Region: The Changing Global Context. In Douglas Webber and Bertrand Fort; eds. *Regional Integration in East Asia and Europe: Convergence or Divergence*. Centre for the Study of Globalization and Regionalization. New York: Routledge. p.24.

¹⁷ Acharya, Amitav.2006b. Do norms and identity matter? Community and power in SEA’s Regional Order. In Joseph Liow & Ralf Emmers; eds. *Order and Security in Southeast Asia: Essay in Memory of Michael Leifer*. New York: Routledge. p. 81-83.

social or cultural sense—that is, it is a construct associated with identity”.¹⁸ Additionally it is also important to shift efforts from discussing integration at the elite level to that of non-state actors. As Thomas observes, “If a regional community is to be forged, then it has to go beyond the policy elites to include the peoples, societies and nations [of the region].”¹⁹ Even if, a regional sense of values, though vague in Asia, is necessary to further common interests and initiatives, I contend that dwelling on these types of arguments only seem to stall the process of building social relations, rather there needs to be a common place to start.

Japanese Traditional Crafts; Common Ground for Integration

Traditional crafts could be considered unique in comparison to other commodities as are frequently used in the construction of a society’s local national or global identity. In my following analysis of traditional craft, I follow the route of anthropologists who take ‘objects seriously’ like Douglas who regards material objects as ‘carriers of meaning’²⁰ and Miller who emphasizes objects are constructed as social forms.²¹ Crafts are defined as products that are produced either completely by hand or with the help of tools. Crafts are made from raw materials and can be produced in unlimited numbers. Such products can be utilitarian, aesthetic, artistic, creative, culturally expressive, decorative, functional, traditional, religiously and socially symbolic and significant.²² According to Schlereth, objects such as crafts can reflect the beliefs, values, ideas, attitudes, and assumptions of a particular community or society at a given time.²³ The common assumption underlying those craft objects, made or modified by humans, can reflect the belief patterns of

¹⁸ Rumley, D. 2005. The geopolitics of Asia-Pacific regionalism in the 21st century. *The Otemon Journal of Australian Studies*, vol.31, pp.5-27. p.6.

¹⁹ Thomas, Nicholas. 2006. Regionalism Beyond an Elite Project: The Challenge of Building Responsive sub-regional economic communities. In Melissa Curley and Nicholas Thomas; editors. *Advancing East Asian Regionalism*. Abingdon, Oxon, UK ; New York : Routledge. p. 5)

²⁰ Douglas, M. and Isherwood, B. (1979) *The World of Goods: Towards an Anthropology of Consumption*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co. p.49

²¹ Tilley, Christopher Y. 2006. Introduction. In *Handbook of material culture*, ed. Christopher Y. Tilley: 1 - 11. London: SAGE.

²² Adapted from the definition for crafts/artisan products at the UNESCO/ITC International Symposium on “Crafts and the International Market: Trade and Customs Codification”, Manila, Philippines, October 1997

²³ Schlereth, Thomas J. 1985. Social history scholarship and material culture research. In *Material culture : A research guide*, ed. Kenneth L. Ames and Thomas J. Schlereth:155 - 195. Lawrence, Kan.: University Press of Kansas.

individuals who made by extension, the belief patterns of the larger society of which they are a part. It could then be said that material objects produced and consumed by large collective groups of humans, or nations, could offer insight into how those individuals and groups sustain life and society, how they reproduce or transform their social relations, and how they can mediate differences in interests and values.²⁴

At present, traditional Japanese crafts are said to be a reflection of Japan's 'traditional past' and promoted as symbols of local identity, serving to thwart the threat of culture and identity loss engendered by globalization. At the same time, these crafts are asserted to be somehow different from similar traditions found in other Asian countries. Craft has a long history in Japan, and is a modern marker of identity because it contrasts with traditions of western countries, and is also presented as distinctive from production in other Asian areas. Craft is able to fulfill this identity function although it is neither one could asserted that many crafts to be indigenous to Japan, nor thought to be unique to Japan—some asian crafts processing having long been part of many Asian societies. Crafts elsewhere have similarly been used as symbols of national identity. For example, in both the United States and Canada quilting becomes a symbol where craft and concepts of national heritage merge. That quilting can be embraced by both societies as a cultural symbol representing a particular historic tradition shows that a craft need not be unique to a given society to be embraced as a symbol of cultural identity.

There are parallels surrounding economic segregation in modern societies, and the paradoxical nature of consumerism surrounding craft. Acknowledged by Creighton the desire to re-capture crafts, or to engage in them as craftspeople, often also involves an ideological rejection of commercialism and consumerism.²⁵ However, despite such desires, these processes are infused throughout the place of craft in modern societies, seen in examples such as craft tours, the marketing of craft classes, the selling of craft products, and the survival of craft techniques in the market. The economics in which craft is embedded still evoke considerations of identity and values. For William Morris

²⁴ McCracken, Grant David. 1990. Chapter 7: The evocative power of things. In *Culture and consumption : New approaches to the symbolic character of consumer goods and activities*:104 - 117. Bloomington Indiana University Press,.

²⁵ Creighton, Millie. 1997. Consuming rural Japan: The marketing of tradition and nostalgia in the Japanese travel industry. *Ethnology*, 1997, 36, 3, summer 36, no. 3: 239-254.

(1834–1896), leader in Britain’s nineteenth century craft re-vitalization movement, the commitment to craft ultimately fostered a commitment to socialist thought. He believed alleviating economic differentiation was necessary to reach the ideal of paradise on earth, and allow all people to appreciate the beauty that potentially can exist in everyday life through close interface with crafted material goods.²⁶ However, making a living from craft in the present economic climate usually means catering for an affluent elite.²⁷

The Present Condition Of Japanese Crafts And The Need For Integration

Japanese formal authorities have been vigorously involved in protecting and reproducing ‘traditional’ cultural properties. Commencing in the 1950s the Japanese government has been protecting intangible cultural properties such as traditional craft techniques and the people who make them, who were designated by the government as ‘human’ or ‘national’ treasures.²⁸ ‘Traditional’ production locations are also protected by Japanese authorities, as in the case of the Japanese Folklore Society designating places with titles such as the ‘most traditional village left in Japan’.²⁹

Nevertheless the annual production value of traditional crafts, according to the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI), maintained a monetary value of 500 billion yen throughout 1980s, although a gradual decreasing trend occurred. However in the 1990s, the rate of decrease suddenly accelerated, and in 10 years, that figure was slashed in half, dropping to about 260 billion yen in 2000 (see Table 1 for a more detailed breakdown of the decline). This decline had serious economic and social repercussions for Japan’s traditional craftwork industry. The decline is obvious in the regions where large-scale traditional craftwork industries have historically been located. For example, Yamanaka lacquerware in Ishikawa Prefecture, its volume of production per year has

²⁶ William Morris, *On Art and Socialism: Essays and Lectures* (London: J. Lehmann, 1947).

²⁷ See Millie Creighton, ‘Nostalgia, Identity, and Gender: Woven in 100 Per Cent Pure Silk’, in Gloria A. Hickey (Ed.), *Making and Metaphor: A Discussion of Meaning in Contemporary Craft* (Ottawa and Hull: The Canadian Museum of Civilization and The Institute for Contemporary Canadian Craft, 1994), pp. 100–113.

²⁸ Moeran, B. (1984) *Lost Innocence: Folk Craft Potters of Onta, Japan*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

²⁹ Martinez, D.P. (1990) ‘Tourism and the Ama: The Search for a Real Japan’, in E. Ben-Ari, B. Moeran and J. Valentine (eds) *Unwrapping Japan: Society and Culture in Anthropological Perspective*, pp. 97–116. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

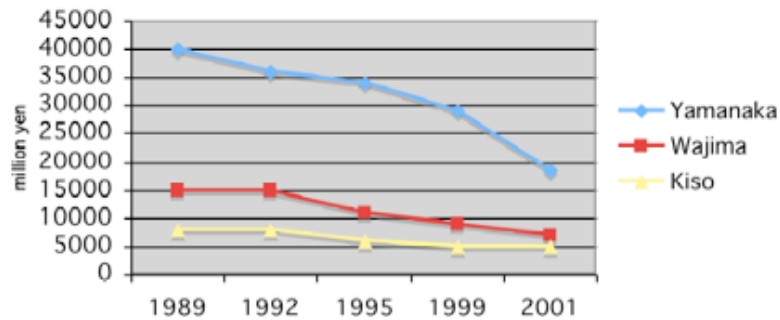
decreased from 40 billion yen in 1989, to 18.5 billion yen in 2001. This decrease in production volume can also be seen in Wajima City, a well-known production region of lacquerware, decreasing its amount from 14.8 billion yen to 7.6 billion yen in the same period of time (see Figure 1).

Table 1. The Present Condition of Japan’s Traditional Craftwork Industry

| Item | 2006 | Reference Value (Peak Year) |
|---|---------------------------|----------------------------------|
| The number of people engaged in the craft | 93,000 People | 290,000 People (1979) |
| The number of companies | 16,700 Companies | 34,043 Companies (1979) |
| The amount of production | 1,773 Hundred million yen | 5,400 Hundred million yen (1983) |
| Percentage of craftsperson’s under 30 years old | 6.1% | 28.6% (1974) |

Source: Association for the Promotion of Traditional Craft Industries, Japan³⁰

Figure 1. Changes in the Production of Laquerware: Three Japanese Locality Examples



Source: Association for the Promotion of Traditional Craft Industries, Japan³¹

³⁰ <http://www.kougei.or.jp/english/> - accessed July 1, 2009

³¹ Ibid.

The decrease in demand for traditional crafts has thus reached a state of crisis, shaking the very foundations of the economic, social, cultural livelihood of traditional Japanese craftspeople. To counter this situation, measures aimed at promoting crafts domestically were also implemented by METI and local governments, according to the Law for the Promotion of Traditional Craft Product Industries enacted in 1974 and re-reformed again in 2004. For example, to date, the Ministry has identified over 200 types of traditional crafts that must meet its five conditions (see Table 3), and the Association for the Promotion of Traditional Craft Industries, the primary body backing the craft making business, has certified over 5,000 master craftspeople.

Table 2. Five Conditions for “Traditional” Authorization

| A condition item | |
|------------------|--|
| 1 | The article must be used mainly in everyday life. |
| 2 | The article must be primarily manufactured by hand. |
| 3 | The article must be manufactured using traditional techniques. |
| 4 | The materials should be mainly those which have been traditionally employed. |
| 5 | The industry must be of a regional nature. |

Source: Association for the Promotion of Traditional Craft Industries, Japan³²

In recent years the decreasing production value of traditional crafts has resulted in a sharp drop in the number of practicing handicraft firms as well as craftspeople. Despite the implementation of rigorous promotional measures, the atrophy afflicting the craft making business has not been effectively stemmed. In order to prevent the decline and to urge development of traditional craftwork industry, various attempts at revival have been linked with other industries such as tourism and the development of innovative traditional goods - all over Japan.

The Association for the Promotion of Traditional Craft Industries recognizes Japanese craft as more than just commodities to be sold; they believe that the attachment of individuality of handicrafts, fineness and expression of aesthetic appreciation of Japanese

³² Ibid.

ideals is an essential part of the products that are produced. It is critical for the products to survive as reflected in this statement;

“METI's efforts to promote traditional Japanese crafts is done in the hope that the Japanese people as well as the people of the world do not forget the quality of handwork and keep a place in their hearts for the unassuming and innocent products of direct human effort as well as the products of contemporary technology. Handmade objects are not a thing of the past, however economic factors may increase their market price, but are our contact with something basic and profoundly precious.”³³

Outside of Japan, while the demand for Japanese crafts is somewhat limited, the demand for Japanese craftspeople's to share or evaluate the level of craft of other nations has been notable. The Council for Local Authorities (CLAIR) is among several agencies in Japan that has been the most active in pursuing opportunities for international cooperation projects that relate to traditional craft. CLAIR states,

“International exchange between local governments has begun to move beyond “international exchange” and other exchanges of goodwill. Still building upon the established foundations of goodwill, local authorities are now actively developing “international cooperation projects” by making use of the special human resources and expertise they possess.”³⁴

Since 1996, the goals of such cooperation activities have been well defined by CLAIR and involve the cooperation of both Japanese and various Asian local governments which state that the objectives of such cooperative projects should:

- (1) Be diverse and take advantage of unique regional characteristics;
- (2) Have increased citizen participation;
- (3) Be undertaken by local governments and their partners as equals;
- (4) Be carefully crafted to meet the wishes of cooperative partners.³⁵

Recently examples of some of the local cooperative projects have included in 2007, Japan-China Friendship Forum in Kitakami; 2006, Japan Specialist dispatch project on Pottery in Cambodia; and 2004, The Kiso Lacquerware Cooperative.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ CLAIR: Local Authorities International Cooperation Promotion Projects ("Model Projects") <http://www.clair.or.jp/e/sien/model.html> assessed July 1, 2009

³⁵ Ibid.

Case Study: The Kiso Lacquerware Cooperative

Background and History

One type of protected craft that has a following outside of Japan is that Kiso-lacquerware. In 1975 the processes of producing and the final products of the style of Kiso lacquerware and several craftsmen were designated as traditional crafts by METI (then MITI). According to the local government in the Kiso Valley, in Nagano Prefecture, Lacquerware has been produced in considerable quantities for around 600 years. Unlike other lacquerware industries in Japan, this region produces large items of lacquerware including low tables, dining tables, screens and folding screens. According to its remaining craftspeople's the greatest distinguishing feature of Kiso Lacquerware is the way in which items are lacquered in many layers with many designs and painted using different colors of lacquer.³⁶ A large workforce of craftsmen produces unique pieces such as trays, lunch boxes and tiered boxes, making a major contribution to the economy of the region (see Figure 2.)

Figure 2. Example of Kiso Lacquerware



Source: Association for the Promotion of Traditional Craft Industries, Japan³⁷

The idea for the Kiso Myanmar Cooperative began in 1994, when the Myanmar Governor General, who oversees small and medium sized enterprises, visited the village of Narakawa-mura and signed a statement of mutual agreement for technical cooperation. The Narakawa-mura village office then dispatched an exploratory commission to

³⁶ <http://www.kougei.or.jp/english/> - accessed July 1, 2009

³⁷ Ibid.

Myanmar and beginning in 1998, three delegations of master craftspeople were sent to impart their technical skills to local Myanmar craftsmen. In addition, trainees from Myanmar were sent to receive technical instruction in lacquerware production at the Kiso lacquerware craft high school. In order to implement the project, the lacquerware district in Kiso utilized a support system co-sponsored by Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Japan International Cooperation Agency and the Council of Local Authorities for International Relations. Initially this type of cooperation is part of the Specialist Dispatch Project, which is international cooperation project initiated by CLAIR. Under the project, an employee (including those who are retirees) of a Japanese local authority with specialized knowledge or experience is being dispatched upon receiving request from an ASEAN local government, in order to improve technology in the local area, train local personnel, and promote friendly cooperative relations between Japanese and ASEAN's local governments. The objects of the Specialist Dispatch Program is to:

- (1) Survey the raw materials of the locality
- (2) Survey the level of skills by observing the craftsman performing processes where the level of their skills, and also their problems that are commonplace in the traditional methods of manufacturing pottery in the village were surveyed.
- (3) Training on craft techniques
- (4) Training on marketing know-how: Participants were given insights on the importance of understanding local needs in order to market their products effectively.

As part of the series of cooperative schemes, the project put into effect strategies that involved local Japanese residents, such as female villagers' study trips to other countries and conducting elementary school classes aimed at raising global understanding. These served to raise appreciation among the Kiso residents of the lacquerware that was produced.

Myanmar Lacquerware is also thought to have had a long history of production, and originated from techniques imported from China in the 11th century. The techniques used in Myanmar production are similar to that of the Kiso craftsman's (see Figure 3.). Lacquerware in Myanmar is a cottage industry and there is a training school that was set up under the Department of Home Industry in the post- Independence period has been

upgraded to institute-level by the present Government and trainees are recruited from around the area. They receive stipends and scholarship grants from the Government.

Though I was unable to obtain statistics, according to Myanmar's Department of Tourism states "With the promotion of local and foreign tourism, the adoption of market-orientated economy and accession of Myanmar into the ASEAN (in 1997, lacquerware making has become a thriving industry."³⁸

Figure 3. Example of Myanmar Lacquerware



Source: Myanmar Tourism Promotion Board³⁹

Prospects and Challenges for the Cooperative

According to CLAIR's final report "both the socio-economic impacts of the projects were numerous".⁴⁰ Additionally the Myanmar Government stated;

"to have greatly appreciated the exchange program to dispatch technical instructors and to receive trainees, and is thought to be useful in improving crafts production skills. The fruits of the programs have started to show in the quality of the lacquerware being produced. New buds of exchange have started to sprout such as in future discussions for more overseas training."⁴¹

³⁸ Myanmar Tourism Promotion Board <http://www.myanmar-tourism.com/> Assessed July 1, 2009

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Takuya, Urushihara. 2004. The prospects for traditional Japanese crafts. *Economy, Culture & History Japan Spotlight Bimonthly* 23, no. 4: 48-49.

⁴¹ Ibid.

However, the Kiso Cooperative Project was not entirely without challenges. According to CLAIR the Kiso project and future exchanges with Myanmar have been suspended because,

“As it is a small-scale local governmental program, the greatest challenge is securing funds for the cooperative exchange programs. Fortunately we have received understanding and cooperation from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, CLAIR, etc., for adoption into their programs each time, making it possible to continue our programs.”⁴²

With local government finances strained, financing is also difficult to secure at the village office level. Moreover, the lacquerware making businesses are unable to identify any justifiable economic merits to the program. As well due to the high value placed on Kiso Lacquerware domestically, Japanese official had concerns about cheaper lower quality Myanmar-made products flooding the Japanese market as a result of the cooperation project. And as for the expansion of Lacquerware sales overseas, stable distribution channels have yet to be established.

Is That All? : Future Strategies For Cooperation

While for local government officials the cooperative was not entirely a success in terms of its economic outcomes, for CLAIR the social and economic is somewhat dependant upon one another;

“International exchange is regarded as the promotion of mutual understanding, with emphasis placed on human interaction. However, it's becoming increasingly necessary to consider such exchange in terms of its benefits to the regions, especially to regional economies. Given this situation, it's getting more important than ever to achieve specific outcomes in the activities of CLAIR. CLAIR will support in particular the promotion of economic exchange between local governments in Japan and those in ASEAN, regions which are increasingly gaining the attention of Japan and the world for their expected higher economic growth.”⁴³

For the people, those involved in the cooperative, the artists and trainees, they believed it was more that an economic prospect. One craftsman is

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ <http://www.clair.or.jp/e/forum/index.html> - assessed July 1, 2009

quoted as saying “For Japan, I feel it is necessary to establish and respect local cultures and values while engaging in global collaboration and systematization, teaching someone who is interested in my craft is a good way to do this.”⁴⁴

Though the tension between the economic and the social will always exist and first and foremost on the minds of officials will be its economic prospects, it is imperative to take an interest in the traditional crafts of the world, and approach the idea of traditional crafts with a global vision in order to foster the development of traditional crafts on a regional level. Craft can be a tool for this as lacquerware is produced in many of Japan’s neighbors such as China, Taiwan, South Korea, Thailand, Myanmar, Vietnam and Bhutan.

Owing to the exchanges with Myanmar, states Takuya, the local citizenry has acquired a better understanding of Japan, and the experiences gained have led to the development of new products.⁴⁵ For Japanese craftspeople, sharing techniques should not be a point of distress rather having a point of contact with other cultures could breed ideas for new crafts. The answer shall not present itself in looking solely at the economic benefits alone, together there may be ways to thwart the influx of overseas products while at the same time building mutual understanding of another’s identity, values and culture. Moreover, as Japan relies heavily on foreign sources of raw materials, the entire production process cannot be domestically self-contained. The need to widen the scope of vision and draw together the respective energies of the various actors, ideas for fostering the traditional craft industry should be generated from a “regional” point of view, and it is essential that the resulting measures also be implemented from that perspective.

The objective of these types of cooperation’s should not be wholly focused on economic outcomes or the setting up of institutions. Rather, emphasis on enhancing regional co-operation in terms of culture, promotion of better understanding of Asia's civilization, arts and culture and possibly common craft heritage. Craft collaboration has the potential to promote mutual respect and greater understanding of Japan and its neighbor’s diverse cultural backgrounds so as to strengthen the foundations for making an

⁴⁴ Takuya, Urushihara. 2004. The prospects for traditional Japanese crafts. *Economy, Culture & History Japan Spotlight Bimonthly* 23, no. 4: 48-49.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

Asian regional community more cohesive, strong and competitive. Further strategic objectives should also consider

1. The support for intercultural dialogue within the region, by means of ensuring the preservation of cultural heritage and have promoting contemporary cultural productions.
2. The fostering cultural and artistic cooperation among regions with regard to cultural activities related to arts, architecture and literature as well as promotion activities namely exhibitions and festivals;
3. The promotion of cross border, bilateral and multilateral cooperation among.

Initiatives that keep these strategies in mind cannot help but to create a community of common values that exist for the preservation of cultural heritage as an instrument of social, human and economic development.

Conclusions

A difficult challenge for Japan and East Asia in the twenty-first century is to transcend 'the economic' aspects of regional integration and attempt to understand the identities, values and culture of its neighboring nations. Perhaps as in the case of regional collaboration in the form of traditional craft cooperation Asian countries in the next few decades, it may not only be made stronger via economic ties but also pave the way for a promising Asian community in which common values and cultural underpinnings are central. It is evident that social cooperation amongst nations could enable opportunities for an expansion of ASEAN's traditional mandates of high-level political and security issues to issues that are more relevant on a grassroots level. The new vision could be that of a people's centered ASEAN, where a government-driven economic regional association to a people-centered regional community exists. Where a regional awareness of identity and common values, would lead to regional cohesion and level of cooperation among likely member states at the grassroots level.

Perhaps even a long term greater objective might be to collaborate with its neighbors to create crafts not unique Japanese identity and pride, but rather as emblems of a greater Asia -- engaging, appealing and profitable beyond its shores. If that scenario were

to come to fruition, it will may create a more meaningful discourse about the traditional crafts of Asia and not merely that say of China or Japan. However future research and initiatives need to be undertaken to understand the concerns of the craftsmen and local organizations. Many questions remain concerning the role of identity, value and culture. Whether and how much does identity and values matter as an independent variable to regional integration? What constitutes an Asian identity if anything at all? Further study is also needed on the types of approaches that might be mutually beneficial for both Japanese crafts and its cooperation's, to protect techniques and its human resources so that they feel comfortable sharing tradition.

I maintain however, that traditional craft embedded with notion of identity and values and culture, has the potential to enhance long term efforts towards community building, especially when economic integration takes place. It may be in the best interest of not to face Asia faces the dual challenges of identifying a common identity or common culture but rather focus on grassroots commonalties beginning with traditional goods that have meaning and value in them. There is hope as the governments of South Korea, Japan and China agreed to celebrate 2007 as the year of cultural exchanges, in fact many of those proposed cultural exchanges were based on pop culture exchanges, objects with meaning and identity of the various regions.⁴⁶ While continued economic prosperity will accelerate the formation of regional integration, an understanding of a common culture or common identity will be susceptible to domestic political whims if it is found only at the elite level, there is greater strength when values are shared by average people throughout the region. Only then can regional integration be secured.

⁴⁶ Leheny, D. 2006. A narrow place to cross swords; Soft power and the politics of Japanese popular culture in East Asia. In Katzenstein, Peter J. Ed. Beyond Japan : the dynamics of East Asian regionalism. Ithaca : Cornell University Press, 2006. p.211 -233.