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RECONSIDERING THE MINGEI UNDŌ AS A COLONIAL DISCOURSE: THE POLITICS OF VISUALIZING ASIAN "FOLK CRAFT"

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1 Problematics

Yanagi Sōetsu (1889–1961) is known as the founder of the Mingei undō, or the Folk Craft Movement. His main idea consists of rehabilitating the "immaculate beauty of everyday ware made by unknown craftsmen," which stands in a sharp opposition to the modern Western notion of individual artist. This antithesis to Western modernism has one of its origins in his discovery of Korea during the Japanese occupation. Yanagi visits the peninsula for the first time in 1916, and his initiation into the Korean arts and crafts seems to have a vital effect on the elaboration of his Mingei ideology.

Why was Yanagi's Korean experience crucial to the creation of the Folk Craft Movement? What was the role Yanagi attributed to Korea as Japan's annexed colony? This paper attempts to elucidate the conditions which enabled Yanagi's "invention" of an Asiatic aesthetic tradition in a colonial context. I will argue that the technique and strategy of "visualizing" the "unknown craftsmanship" as a recognizable aesthetic category required an idealized "victim" of Europeanization. Japan's ambiguous position as the unique colonizer among non-European nation-states in the first half of the 20th century gave simultaneously a privileged position and a biased limitation to Yanagi's insight into Korean arts and crafts that he hoped to "rehabilitate." Yanagi's anti-modernist and anti-colonial stance must be re-examined as constituting elements of colonial experience in Asian modernity.

2 Circumstances

On March 1, 1919, at the occasion of the funeral of the abolished 26th Emperor of the Lee-Dynasty, the Declaration of Independence was pronounced in Seoul and the anti-Japan Independence Movement rapidly spread throughout the peninsula. Violent suppressions and massacres by the Japanese army caused at least 7500 casualties (even according to Japanese official source), and provoked world-wide criticism. Immediately after these violent inci-

dents, Yanagi published several essays as *My Sympathy toward (and Compassion on) the Koreans (Yomiuri Shinbun Journal*, May 20–24, 1919; *Complete Works (C.W.,* vol. 6:23–32) and *Letter to My Korean Friends* (*Kaizō*, May 1920; *C.W.*, vol. 6:33–51), the latter being heavily censored with many phrases crossed out by Japanese authorities on charge of "toppling-down the imperial rule" and "destroying the public peace." It is also known that the publication by the journal *Tōa Nippon* of his "letter" in Korean translation was also forbidden twice by the Office of Government General in Korea.

Along with these anti-military manifestos, Yanagi also published a booklet *About the Establishment of the Korean Folk Art (and Craft) Museum (Chōsen minzoku bijutsukan) (Shirakaba*, Jan. 1921; *C.W.,* vol. 6:79–83) and organized an "Exhibition of Korean Folk Art (and Craft)" ("Chōsen Minzoku Bijutsuten") in Tōkyō on July, 1921, thereby offering an overview of Korean art (*Shinchō,* Jan. 1921; *C.W.*, vol. 6:89–109). These manifestations are known to have contributed to build up the reputation of Chŏson ceramics, which has largely been ignored until then in Korea because of the Confucian ideology despising handiworks.

It must be noted here that the designation of "Korean race" (*Chōsen minzoku*) as an independent entity could already constitute an open provocation to the Japanese authority, which was aiming at erasing Korean identity as a "race." Indeed, when Yanagi later opened the Korean Popular Art Museum in Seoul in 1924 on his own private initiative, it is said that the Office of Government General asked Yanagi to omit the word *minzoku*, which Yanagi refused to do (Takasaki 1997:102). At the same time the term *minzoku* is ambivalent. While designating the Korean "race," the term is connected here with *geijutsu* (art) to denote the notion of "folk art." Even though it reveals apparent affinity with the notion of, say, "tribal art," *minzoku geijutsu* also anticipates the emergence of the term *Mingei*, as its abbreviation. Retrospectively speaking, at least, it is no exaggeration to see here—i. e., in Yanagi's early conception of Korean arts and crafts—the germination of the key-term which Yanagi will propagate. It is only later that Yanagi prefers translating *mingei* as "folk craft" in token of his respect to the "unknown craftsmen," whom he wants to differentiate from modern Western type "individual artists."

In 1922, Yanagi collected his articles on Korea and published a volume, called *Korea and Her Art*. The book includes one chapter on historical architecture, the Kwanghwa-mun, the front gate of the Kyŏngbok-kung Pal-

ace in Seoul. It has been announced that the gate would be demolished in order to build in its place a new Renaissance style Government Central Office. Yanagi's article, *For a Chosŏn Building on the Verge of Demolition* in *Kaizō*, July 1922; *C.W.*, vol. 6:145–156) is written in the style of a lyrical poem addressed to the Kwanghwa-mun, which Yanagi personalizes as "thou" (*o-mae*). The destined demolition is compared to the death sentence pronounced to a beloved human being. As a farewell (or "a funeral oration" as he puts it) to this historical monument, Yanagi points out with resentment that "those who try to save thy life are sentenced to treason." To destroy this "pure Oriental art" and replace it by "an European architecture without any creative beauty" is "a sacrilege," he maintains, "which cannot have any positive justification."

Probably considering the pernicious effect of the demolition, the Government General finally changed its idea and decided to preserve the gate by relocating it. Yanagi's passionate protest is believed to have contributed to the survival of the gate (although Yanagi is displeased with the seemingly "generous" idea of relocation, because this concession already distorts the harmony with the nature according to the rule of geomancy). After the defeat of The Great Japanese Empire in 1945, the gate was replaced only to be destroyed definitively during the Korean War, and has now been rebuilt with reinforced concrete. (Let us add that the Government General's Central Office which replaced Kwanghwa-mun has served as the Korean Central National Museum until its "removal" executed in 1996 by presidential initiative. Thus the symbolic relic of Japan's infamous rule on Korea was physically erased from the Korean soil only more than half a century after the Korean "Liberation"...)

3 Yanagi's view of Korean art

These circumstances indicate Yanagi's commitment to political issues in colonized Korea. Still, the fact that his writings were censored in Japan and his publications partly banned in Korea do not justify by itself Yanagi's position. Let us have a closer look at his writings.

Yanagi's early understanding of Korean arts and crafts is based on his intuitive judgement which he manifests in his compassionate *Letter to My Korean Friends* (1920). According to Yanagi, "Korean history, marked by enduring cruelty and painful experiences, has endowed Korean art with in-

explicable sorrow and sadness. There reigns a beauty of sorrow, a tearful sadness" (*C.W.*, vol. 6:42). This basic intuition is developed in *My Sympathy toward Korean People* as follows:

> the lingering beautiful lines [of Korean wares] are nothing but the suffering hearts that have remained behind to pronounce their pain. Their grievances, their prayers, their lamentations, their tears, all seem to flow through these delicate lines. Whether it is a Buddhist statue or a porcelain, we cannot but be touched by these Korean lines. In these lines are charged all the tearful resentments of the Korean people. (*C.W.*, vol. 6:43)

In *Korea and Her Art*, published, as noted above, in 1922, Yanagi proposes an idealistic view of Korean art as an art of sorrow which is in strong opposition to Chinese and Japanese art. "If Chinese art represents the will, the Japanese art is the art of emotion, then Korean art alone, situated between the two, is destined to be burdened with the sorrow." According to Yanagi's geographic rhetoric, the "Continent" secures itself on the earth, the "Island" cheerfully enjoys the earth, whereas the "Peninsula" distances itself from the earth. Sandwiched in between the heavy pressure from the "Continent" and the idleness of the "Island," the agonized history of the "Peninsula" lacks joyfulness as well as strength. Yanagi thus refers to a feminine metaphor in his poetic description of Korea. Humiliated by oppressions from the exterior, tormented by sorrow and loneliness, Korea hides her suffering with patience. If the will of the "Continent" builds up forms, and if the emotion of the "Island" excels in the use of colors, then the sorrow of the "Peninsula" finds its expression in lines. The first one is strong, the second one is joyful and the third one is depressed...

To this intuitive and dogmatic impression of the Korean "beauty of sorrow and grievance" he adds an observation on the poorness of color. Yanagi finds—or believes to have found—in the white of Korean dresses the sign of mourning." This white color has been a symbol of the lonely and extremely modest heart. By wearing white the Korean people is mourning in eternity. The painful and hopeless historical experiences the Korean people had to endure seems to have made it suitable to wear white." Yanagi declares that "the sorrow detaches itself from the color," and "the fact that Korean people have not been able to afford enjoying colors has examples also in ceramics" (*C.W.*, vol. 6:105–06). Thus Yanagi views Korean art as "lacking in strong form and beautiful colors," and characterizes it mainly by its "lines full of

sorrow and tears." As if self-evident, Yanagi draws the following subjective conclusion:

> In order to transmit that helpless and sorrow [Korean] heart, nothing would be more suitable than these [Korean] lines which draw our tears. (*C.W.*, vol. 6:108)

4 Korean criticism to Yanagi in the 1970s

Yanagi's sentimental and pathetic view of Korean art certainly reflects his sense of guilty and resentment with respect to the brutality of the Japanese government which he even castigates as "shame on shame" (*C.W.*, vol. 6:38). Yet to reduce the Korean art to the expression of "sorrow and tears" is not only a heavily biased shortcut but also an excessive simplification. It is also undeniable that his sympathy to the subjugated Korean people is paternalistic. In Japan, however, Yanagi's humanism has been highly praised as a courageous protest under colonial rule while his unprecedented insight into Korean art has been widely appreciated. His authority is rarely questioned, with Takasaki Sōji and Idekawa Naoki are the two main exceptions.

By contrast, many Korean intellectuals have criticized Yanagi's idea of the "beauty of sorrow," as Kikuchi Yūko (Kikuchi 1994:33) adequately summarized. In 1968, Kim Talsu, a Korean writer who lived in Japan until his death in 1997, rejected Yanagi's view of white as the color of sadness and mourning. For Kim Talsu, broad-mindedness (*ōrakasa*) and a sense of humor which defy sadness are the essential "Korean flavors," a view no less essentialist than Yanagi's pessimistic opinion.

In 1969, the poet Kim Jiha declared, in clear opposition to Yanagi's view, that "rather than the sorrow or the interiorization (*naimenka*), what is predominant in Korean art is the masculine beauty (*danseiteki-na bi*), inspiring lively movement, resistance and the will to overcome difficulties (*yakudō, teikō, kokufuku*)." Instead of Yanagi's "lingering line," Kim Jiha sees the essence of Korean art in the conflicts between, and interceptions of, the composing elements, as is clearly shown in Pansori music or in Tarchum mask play, which Kim Jiha himself will mobilize as symbols of popular resistance and political revolt against the official authority, preluding the poet's own imprisonment under the Paik Jonghi's military regime.

Kim Yanggi, another Korean writer and ethnologist residing in Japan, interprets the Korean white as a cheerful and optimistic color, representing the light of the sun, based on the popular belief in the sky divinity, Hanunīm.

Yet, this view is harshly attacked by Kubo Satoru, who highly appreciates Kim Jiha. While on the one hand criticizing Kim Yanggi as a typical example of the "baseless" (*shisōsei no nai*) nationalistic criticism of Yanagi, which was developed in Japan's journalism, Kubo ridicules, on the other hand, Yanagi's disciples who remain incapable of objecting even to Kim Yanggi's "thoughtless" opinion (as he puts it).

Ch'oe Harim's harsh commentary on a 1974 Korean translation of Yanagi's *Korea and Her Art* shows some of the characteristics of the tenor of Korean criticism of Yanagi in the 1970s. "Nothing is more dangerous than to characterize the Korean art in reference to Korea's unfortunate modern history or to think that the [Korean] misfortune was the origin of its people's feeling of sorrow" (translated into Japanese in *Tenbō*, July 1976). Ch'oe Harim traces in Yanagi's thinking "a mischievous manipulation of Japanese colonialism which consists of reducing Korean people into defeatism, stagnation and dependency, depriving the Korean history of autonomous momentum of its people."

Ch'oe Harim's comments were supplemented by several book reviews. For Lee Bangyŏl, Yanagi's protest to the Japanese imperialism was nothing but an act of masturbation. Kim Yunsu sees in the "beauty of sorrow" a typical colonial aesthetics that should be rejected. Mun Myongdhe writes that Yanagi's position is similar to that of the official Japanese scholars of the time in that his sympathy to the Koreans is comparable to the attitude of a master to his servants. These opinions reflect the complex cultural atmosphere in Korea around 1975, near the end of Park Jonghi's reign, when the unprecedented "Japan fever" was regarded as unhealthy while emotional rejections of everything Japanese were equally put into question with some anxiety.

5 Reappraisal and reconciliation

Under these circumstances, Lee Chinhŭi, a Korean writer and historian staying in Japan, points out several misunderstandings and blind spots in these criticisms to Yanagi (Lee 1980). First, he writes that the view that Yanagi saw only "sorrow and sadness" in Korean art is misleading and distorted. In the latter half of 1920s, Yanagi, in fact, shifted his emphasis from "the beauty of sorrow" of the white ceramics (*backja*; jap.: *hakuji*) made by the official pottery of the Lee-Dynasty to "the beauty of health" of ordinary Korean household crafts. Let us add, that Yanagi owes this discovery of the popular

crafts to Asakawa Noritaka and Asakawa Takumi, for whose initiation into Korean life Yanagi shows his gratitude (Takasaki:1997).

Second, Lee Chinhŭi also points out that these criticisms overlook the fact that Yanagi's interest in the Korean white ceramics leads his attention to ordinary Korean household crafts. Undoubtedly, Yanagi's reflections on these Korean popular crafts eventually result in the elaboration of his ideology of "Folk Craft." In this way Lee Chinhŭi positively estimates Yanagi's intuitive insight into Korean ceramics as a starting point of Yanagi's Folk Craft Movement.

After World War II, Yanagi develops his strongly Buddhist-flavored aesthetics under the influence of his friend and teacher, Suzuki Daisetsu. Yanagi now emphasizes the "naturalness" and "freedom" of Korean ceramics. The tea bowls, like *Idojawan* (highly appreciated in Japanese tea ceremony since the 16th century onward) find their origin—if not their highest quality—in the ordinary rice bowls of Korean people (known as *buncheng sagi*, and called *Mishima-de* in Japan). In his last years, it is into these Korean low-quality wares for everyday life (*getemono*) that Yanagi projects his own ideal of unknown craftsmen who do not care about the beauty or the ugliness (*bishū*) of art.

At this "mindless" (*mushin*) stage, the limit of Yanagi's early emphatic vision of the "beauty of sorrow" is already transcended. Therefore, it is imprudent and rush—Lee maintains—to judge Yanagi's understanding of Korean art only from his early writings that are compiled in *Korea and Her Art*.

6 Post-colonial criticism to popular craft

Since the mid 1990s, however, a new type of re-evaluation of Yanagi's aesthetics has come to the fore in connection with the post-colonial critical theory. Comparing Yanagi's conception with Asakawa Takumi, Lee Byonjin (Lee 1997) problematizes Yanagi's conception as a whole. While Asakawa Takumi respected both craftsmen's position and the users' point of view in estimating ordinary Korean handicrafts as objects circulating in the market, Lee Byonjin states that Yanagi's "highly aestheticist" vision overlooks these two crucial elements. Despite Yanagi's emphasis on the importance of the "usage" (*yō*), and despite his appreciation of the practical functionality of the form of the wares, Yanagi, in reality, confines these objects to the realm of beauty.

Here is one of the main paradoxes of Yanagi's ideology. His aesthetic and emphatic contemplation ironically displaces these handwares from their original context of everyday usage. It is at the price of this de-contextualization that the unknown Korean popular craft were saved from oblivion and publicly recognized and made visible as aesthetic objects to be conserved and presented at the Korean Popular Art Museum. Here lies a fundamental dilemma of the politics of "visualizing" and "aestheticizing" what has until then remained invisible and out of the realm of aesthetic consideration.

7 Ambivalence of identity politics and subject formation

My intention here is not so much to criticize Yanagi's ideology as rather to demarcate the ambivalent historical and social conditions which simultaneously enabled and limited Yanagi's view of Korean art as well as his conception of the Folk Craft Movement in general. Let us examine typical statements which reveal the doublebind situation Yanagi is caught in under the Great Japanese Empire.

Yanagi is famous for his outspoken criticism of Japan's assimilation (*dōka*) politics in the peninsula. "Contrary to what is reported in the newspapers," he says in 1921, "the purpose of my trip to Korea is not at all the indoctrination of the Koreans by artistic enlightenment. Indoctrination and assimilation are enormously ugly words for me ... and I want to erase these words from the Japanese-Korean dictionary" (*C.W.*, vol. 6:50). Yanagi also reveals his resentment to the alterations conducted by a Japanese scholar on the history textbook which was specially edited for Korean pupils. "Needless to say, 'special' means crossing out and erasing from the Korean history the descriptions of Japanese atrocities" (*C.W.*, vol. 6:26). His resentment is justifiable and his conscience is beyond reproach, but it is also clear that he casts no doubt on the fact that in both cases, either recommendable or criminal, the "erasing" agent will always and only be a Japanese. Despite Yanagi's good-will, he thus quasi unconsciously contributes to reducing the Korean people to silent passivity.

During his trip in Korea in 1922, Yanagi was also shocked by the artistic education implemented by the Government General. A huge embroidery work hung on the wall of a school, made by Korean girl students under their Japanese teacher's direction provoked his anger and resentment. "The work looked like a modern Japanese one, with quasi-westernized stupid design

with faint colors, lacking in taste or dignity, where no traces of Korean beauty were recognizable." At this "example of an excellent achievement of the education," as the Japanese teacher proudly explains, Yanagi feels sad and regrets the "loss of Korea's proper beauty under a forced wrongful Japanese education" which he finds simply "criminal" (*C.W.*, vol. 6:29).

Once again his sadness is sincere, and yet his regret betrays a hidden structure of domination, which sustains Yanagi's position as a colonizer. Just as the Europeans have recommended to the Japanese to preserve their traditional art several decades before, Yanagi now encourages the Korean people to liberate themselves from Japanese "westernized" art education (Oguma 1998:404, 729). In this double concentric structure of subordination lies an interiorized "Orientalist gaze" unconsciously embedded in Yanagi's rehabilitation of Korean arts and crafts.

By the same token, the establishment of the Korean Folk Art Museum in 1924 is itself concomitant with Japan's colonization of the Korean peninsula. Under the permission of the Office of Government General, Yanagi can borrow "a beautiful Korean architectural piece" at Chiphyŏng-dang in the Kyonbok-kung Palace. This exceptional favor reminds us of a personal tie Yanagi has enjoyed with the Colonel Governor General, Saitō Makoto, who once served Yanagi's father, Narayoshi, in the Japanese Navy. It is true that the museum saved many Korean handicrafts from oblivion and dispersion. Still, it cannot be denied that by this contribution to the conservation of Korean folk heritage, Yanagi is automatically engaged with the "cultural rule" (*buka tōchi*) advanced by the colonial government. To regard Yanagi's collection not as rescued but as usurped objects, as some critics do, would be an over-emphasized nationalistic reaction, which would not stand historical verification. And yet even such an emotional accusation constitutes itself as an undeniable historical testimony of the hatred that Yanagi's "collaboration" with the colonial authority cannot avoid stirring up.

8 Beyond the victimization of aesthetics: in guise of conclusion

However, we would underestimate Yanagi, if we judge him incapable of noticing these dilemmas. In *My Sympathy to the Koreans*, Yanagi evokes an anecdote of the Japanese Neo-Confucian scholar Yamazaki Anzai. Yamazaki asks: if Confucius and Mencius invaded Japan, what would be the right conduct that a Japanese confucianist should take? According to Yamazaki's

interpretation, the right answer is to defeat the invaders, even if the invadors are Confucius and Mencius themselves. Yanagi finds in this thinking "a deeply imbedded germ of illness." If Yamazaki was right, then the Korean people's revolt against Japan's rule would be also justified, from a Confucian point of view, as an authentic ethical conduct. Therefore, Yanagi argues, in regarding the Korean resistance as "riots," the Japanese government remains steeped in contradiction. It must be noted, however, that Yanagi refers to this parable not to justify the Korean uprising—as some would expect—but to avoid giving the Korean people a dangerous logical pretext which would justify their reprisal.

Yanagi's endeavor as a whole is caught in the same dilemma. In this sense, Yanagi's enterprise can be compared with that of Lafcadio Hearn whom he admires. Makino Yōko convincingly argued (Makino 1986) that Yanagi, who hoped to become a Hearn of Korea, would have referred to Hearn's interpretation of the Japanese smile of resignation in sorrow and suffering. In *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan* (1894), Hearn has tried to explain the Japanese smiles to the European readers as a silent language manifesting the sense of duty, perseverance and self-sacrifice. Consciously or not, Yanagi seems to project Hearn's understanding of this enigmatic Japanese smile on his own interpretation of the "beauty of sorrow" in Korean art.

Makino Yōko has also demonstrated that the "innocence" Yanagi has found in William Blake's poem is to be transformed into the Buddhistic notion of *mushin*, "the state of mind-less," in order to characterize the ideal "immaculate" state of mind of the unknown craftsmen, who work anonymously without any intentional clever thought and free from any artistic ambition or selfish individualism of the Western modern artist. The resulting beauty lies beyond the craftsmen's intention, but is given by *tariki*, i. e., by "someone other's power" as a gift, grace or providence, coming from the Buddha-nature...

The notion of the folk craft is elaborated as an antithesis to the Western category of Fine Arts. The visualization and the recognition of this new category is an attempt at rehabilitating the repressed Asiatic cultural identity under the overwhelming impact of Western culture. The "discovery" of the Korean ceramics as the victim of oppression is prepared in this context. The image of the anonymous Korean craftsmen who patiently endure sorrow can now be understood as the indispensable component of Yanagi's ideology of

folk craft. However biased by the hidden superiority of the colonizer's arrogance, Yanagi's discovery of the Korean folk craft as a repressed voice and his efforts to legitimate it as an expression of immaculate beauty of unknown craftsmen prove in the final analysis that Yanagi's ideology of the folk craft as a whole is conditioned, for better or worse, as a by-product of the interiorized colonialistic discourse.

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