

A STUDY ON JAPANESE MINGEI'S BIRTH IN TAISHO ERA AND ALIENATION IN SHOWA ERA*

Abstract: Yanagi Sōetsu put forward the word "Mingei (Folk Craft)" in 1925 and jointly published the "Purport Book on the Establishment of Japan Mingei Museum" with Tomimoto Kenkichi, Kawai Kanjiro, and Hamada Shoji the following year, so as to launch Japan's "Mingei movement". Some scholars have noticed that during World War II, Mingei was related to "life culture" with fascist ideology, and there was a historical phenomenon that Mingei served politics. This paper attempts to interpret the first-hand texts of Yanagi Sōetsu, Kunio Kishida, and Kiyoshi Miki, discuss how Mingei with a "healthy" original intention came into being, and how it gradually became a tool for Japanese fascist aggression and expansion. Mingei originated in the period of "Taisho Democracy," with a strong left-wing flavor in Japanese history. It contains a beautiful vision of making society "healthy". It has gained influence with the support of elites, and the Mingei movement has progressed well in rural and urban society. Later, Mingei gradually attracted the attention of the Showa fascist government and was absorbed by the concept of "life culture" advocated by the new system in 1940, which was alienated and became a tool for the mobilization of the Japanese fascist war.

Keywords: Yanagi Sōetsu, Mingei, Japanese folk craft, colonialism, imperialism, fascism.

Introduction

Mingei was born in the Taisho Era; it originally conceived the idea of guiding the country to develop in a healthy direction, but this idea became a tool of the Japanese fascist empire in the Showa era and also became a dissident force opposed

* Ph.D student of History College, Nanjing University and Collaborative Innovation Center for South China Sea Studies. Research interests: contemporary British history and contemporary Japanese history. ockskywalker@163.com

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to the people's natural, simple, and peaceful aspirations. At last, it failed the country. This deviation from the original intention of Mingei is worthy of research and discussion in academic circles. There are many achievements in Yanagi Sōetsu's research on Mingei, but there are few studies on the deviation from the original intention of Mingei. The "Complete Works of Yanagi Sōetsu" compiled and published by Chikuma Shobo, is an important document for the study of Mingei. The collected documents are comprehensive and detailed, which has laid a good research foundation for scholars in this field. Some scholars have noticed this "Deviation", such as Kim Brandt, who published the book "Kingdom of Beauty: Mingei and the Politics of Mingei in Imperial Japan" by Duke University Press. From the broad perspective of culture and society, this book deeply analyzes the Mingei through the interaction among intellectuals, collectors, local craftsmen, government officials, businessmen, magazine editors, and middle-class consumers and has an insight into the relationship between "life culture" with fascist ideology and the Mingei. As the pioneer of Japanese Mingei research in China, Xu Yiyi was assigned to the folk craft research center in 1975 to engage in the design of paper-cut. He gradually got to know Mizuo Hiroshi, learned Yanagi Sōetsu's Mingei theory and thought, and then began to translate and publish Yanagi Sōetsu's works. His related work has greatly promoted the development of Mingei research in China. Jiang Junjun noted the cooperative relationship between the Mingei movement and the "snow investigation" and "life culture" movements during World War II in her article "Opinion on the Mingei Movement During the 1937-1945 War". It also analyzes the Mingei movement from the two dimensions of "Japanism" and "serving politics". On the one hand, it assists the government in increasing local and national fiscal revenue from the material level; on the other hand, it attempts to unite all the nations from the spiritual level.

This paper discusses how the Mingei with "healthy" initial intentions came into being and gradually alienated and integrated with the Japanese fascist regime.

The birth of Japanese Mingei

The word "Mingei" originated from the Korean Yi Dynasty ceramic. In September 1914 (Taisho 3), a young man named Asakawa Noritaka hoped to enjoy the three works given to "White Birch" magazine by François Auguste René Rodin. He also brought Yanagi Sōetsu a faceted jar with an autumn flower design from the Korean Li Dynasty (染付秋草文面取壺 そめつけあきくさもんめんとりつぼ) as a gift. Yanagi Sōetsu was deeply moved by the beauty of this work. From his landing in Pusan in 1916 (Taisho 5) to 1940 (Showa 15), he visited Korea 21 times. This work opens the door to the "Mingei movement" in the future. Therefore, in a sense, Japanese "Mingei" originated in Korea.

Yanagi Sōetsu has long been interested in folk art. The old objects he collected in Kyoto had an important impact on the birth of Mingei. According to Yanagi Sori's memory, their home in Lake Teganuma was filled with all kinds of pottery and other folk crafts. Because of the Kanto earthquake in 1923 (Taisho 12), the Yanagi Sōetsu family moved to Kyoto the following year. At that time, Kawai Kanjiro also lived in Kyoto, but Yanagi Sōetsu strongly criticized that Kawai's works were only an imitation of oriental ancient ceramics, so he was estranged from Kawai and they didn't have much contact. This year, Hamada Shoji just returned from Leach Pottery in St. Ives, England. With Hamada's efforts, they bury their hatchet. Yanagi Sōetsu heard about the morning market in Kyoto from Kawai; since then, he and Kawai Kanjiro frequently went to the market to collect the "coarse objects" (下手物 げても 〇). Almost all the important collections of the Japanese folk crafts museum were collected by them in Kyoto at that time.

The investigation of the Yi Dynasty's artifacts then aroused Yanagi Sōetsu's interest in the study of Mokujiki Buddha statues. In 1924 (Taisho 13), when he was admiring the collection of Yi Dynasty ceramics in the house of Komiyama Seizo, the mayor of Ikeda Village, Kofu, Yamanashi Prefecture, he was suddenly attracted by the Buddha statue of "Mokujiki Shonin" that he saw by accident. Yanagi Sōetsu recalled: "It was the first time I met Komiyama. On that day, the two works of Shonin accidentally came into my sight, which may have been fate. According to my request,

the host showed me ceramics, not those sculptures. Two Buddha statues (Ksitigarbha and Amitayusa Tathāgata) are placed in front of the dark warehouse. When I passed them, I inadvertently touched them for my own sight (if the Buddha statues were covered with a piece of cloth, I might never meet the shonin in my life). I was immediately enchanted, and the smile on their lips attracted me at once. This is unusual. If there is no special religious experience, such things cannot be carved." Since then, Yanagi Sōetsu has devoted three years to the study of the Mokujiki Buddha and wrote the article "The Origin of the Discovery of Mokujiki Shonin".

Yanagi Sōetsu's investigation of Mokujiki Buddha eventually led to the birth of Mingei. In 1925 (Taisho 14), during his journey with his friends Kawai Kanjiro and Hamada Shoji to inspect the Mokujiki Buddha statue in Takano Mountain, which is the holy land of Buddhism, the word "Mingei" was born in the hotel discussion, which means folk craft. On April 1, 1926 (Taisho 15), Yanagi Sōetsu jointly published the "Purport Book on the Establishment of the Japan Mingei Museum" with Tomimoto Kenkichi, Kawai Kanjiro, and Hamada Shoji, which is the symbol of the official launch of the Mingei movement and contains the original idea of Mingei. To study the original intention of Mingei, it is necessary to analyze this article. The second sentence in the article is "自然から産みなされた健康な素朴な活々した美を求めるなら、民藝Folk Artの世界に来ねばならぬ". The word "民藝" (Mingei) in this sentence uses "Folk Art" as its English counterpart. The Chinese character "People" (民 みん) in this text not only forms the word "Mingei" (民藝), but also forms two times "Ordinary people" (民衆 みんなしゅう), one time "Nation" (民族 みんなぞく), and one time "National people" (国民 こくみん). In the text, "people" means ordinary and common, and "nation" and "national people" mean the ability of Mingei to represent the uniqueness of the Japanese nation. For example, you can see a pure Japanese world (純日本の世界がある) in the clumsy artifacts made by nameless craftsmen (名無き工人). The Chinese character "Art" (藝 げい) appears in the sentence of "必然蒐集せられる作は、主として工藝Craftの領域に属する". In this sentence, it clearly defines the scope it represents, mainly in the field of "Craft" (

工藝). Mingei aims to pursue a new kind of beauty. The characteristics of this kind of beauty are: health (健康 けんこう), soundness (健全 けんぜん), simplicity (素朴 そぼく), nature (自然 しぜん), freedom (自由 じゆう), clumsy (下手 へた), casualness (無心 むしん), moisture (潤い うるおい), and full of life (生命に充ち). This characteristic is also the essence of beauty (美の本質), recognized by Yanagi Sōetsu, Tomimoto Kenkichi, Kawai Kanjiro, and Hamada Shoji.

The word "Mingei" is very practical and contains a beautiful vision of seeking a "healthy" society. When describing the process of his father Yanagi Sōetsu's Mingei theory, Yanagi Sori wrote: "John Ruskin and William Morris believe that the people who make goods and the people who use them should belong to the same close social community. They also advocate that only a sound society can make sound goods." However, with the expansion of influence, the Mingei theory of pursuing the essence of "health" and constructing a "healthy" society, and the subsequent Mingei movement, make this theory closer to the Japanese fascist government and go farther and farther on the road of "unhealthy".

Alienation of Japanese Mingei

Due to the strong elite attribute contained in Mingei activities, it has been supported by social elites, who are keen on eye-catching social activities such as publishing books, holding exhibitions, establishing Mingei associations, and establishing Mingei museums. Personal taste and aesthetic cultivation are very important to status and social prestige, so Mingei also gathers many elites. For example, the people who initially supported Mingei are often older cultural elites, and their social power comes from the monopoly of educational and aesthetic capital. Those who catch up from behind are some emerging industrial capitalists and intellectuals with higher education.

Mingei began to gain followers and greater influence from its social activities. Since 1931, Yanagi Sōetsu and other Mingei activists have shifted their focus to new Mingei and rural areas. The difference between new Mingei and old Mingei is that it

reduces its attention to old things and changes direction to more active social activities. Their efforts to reform the rural handicraft industry by respecting local traditions and characteristics have quickly attracted people's attention and support. Local craftsmen and elites in San'in and its adjacent areas took the lead in joining this cause. Activities to find a way out and market folk crafts in San'in and other areas have expanded the relationship between Mingei and key institutions of urban consumerism. Such as building distribution channels for retail stores and department stores that establish relationships between mass consumption media. Soon after, the new Mingei and its main promoters gained followers in metropolitan centers in Kyoto, Osaka, Tokyo, and other regions of Japan. In 1934, the Mingei Association was established, which enabled more and more individuals and groups to participate in the production, promotion, and distribution of new Mingei. In addition, the Mingei Association took over the publication of "Kogei" magazine and coordinated other Mingei organizations, such as the newly established Japan Folk Crafts Museum in Tokyo. These activities helped Mingei expand to all regions of Japan.

With the development of Rural Revitalization in Northeast Japan, the social reputation of the Mingei movement went up. In 1930, a serious agricultural crisis called the "Showa agricultural panic" occurred in Japan. By 1931, the northeastern region and Hokkaido had suffered serious crop failure due to severe cold weather. Due to the economic downturn and the influx of urban unemployed into rural areas, many areas of northeast Japan have fallen into poverty. Yanagi Sōetsu believes that encouraging the development of handicraft sidelines in northeast rural areas can improve the poverty status of villages because rural products have local characteristics and can become real local products. It is meaningless to imitate urban style; rural areas should use local materials and traditional methods to produce goods that match modern life. In 1933, in order to reduce the loss from the snow disaster and restore the rural economy in northeast Japan, the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry established the Snowfall Institute. Since 1937, the Snowfall Institute and Mingei Association have made joint efforts to promote Mingei production in northeast Japan. By expanding and rationalizing low-cost cottage industries to

improve the productivity of rural communities and by making full use of the off-season labor force, reformers hope to provide additional sources of income for cash-deficit farmers. At the same time, the efforts to promote Mingei production in northeast rural areas also contribute to boosting the morale of the local people.

The increasingly influential Mingei movement began to attract the interest and attention of the Japanese fascist regime. As early as 1932, the comments made by Kunii Kitaro, director of the Craft Guidance Center of the Ministry of Commerce and Industry (商工省工芸指導所), published in the government publication "Craft News" (工芸ニュース) were representative. He said that people have developed the bad habit of overestimating imported products, having an insufficient understanding of technology, and paying too much attention to science. The Mingei and peasant art movements are commendable, and their efforts have attracted attention to the local manufacturing industry. The main goal of the Japanese fascist government is to create a "beautiful new society" with a "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere". This "beautiful" vision is regarded as a source of aesthetic satisfaction and a source of virtue and strength. As the European academic circles of fascism studies have long emphasized, the consideration of aesthetics is at the core of the fascist plan. Fascist politics is not only characterized by the deliberate manipulation of spectacular new situations and symbols, such as architecture, films, mass programs, gatherings, posters, and uniforms, but also by the transformation of society and country by fascism, which is framed in clear aesthetic terms. Japan is in a peripheral position among the big powers, and national aesthetic uncertainty is the source of its sense of inferiority. The Japanese fascist government realized that having a unique national aesthetic was very important politically and economically.

As a local aesthetic resource for folk art, Mingei can undoubtedly be used by the Japanese fascist government. Regarding the reasons, first of all, at the beginning of the 20th century, the production cost of luxury handicrafts was high, the efficiency was low, and sales were difficult. Japan's famous, exquisite, and luxurious handicrafts gradually declined in the west. In the period between the two world wars, Japan was in a period of style uncertainty. It was unclear whether the country should continue to

promote national goods with local traditional aesthetics. Therefore, the government hopes that the aesthetic resources of Mingei will help manufacturers achieve good performance overseas and establish the international reputation of Japanese art. Secondly, the importance of rural culture represented by Mingei has been recognized. The rural culture of spending less and producing more embodies the local values of production and thrift, emphasizing that such a culture has the ability to reform families and eliminate class and regional differences. If it is accepted by all Japanese, it is conducive to national unity.

With the use of Mingei by the Japanese fascist government, Mingei gradually coincided with the concept of "life culture" advocated by Japanese fascists. "Life culture" was gradually formed when Miki Kiyoshi was in charge of the Showa Research Association, a think tank of Konoe Fumimaro, after 1937, when he formulated a cultural policy outline for the new order (新体制) and formulated cases for the Ministry of Culture. However, due to the hostility of the military authorities and conservative forces, the Showa Research Society had to be disbanded, and its ideological trend was soon absorbed by the Imperial Rule Assistance Association. The Imperial Rule Assistance Association was established in October 1940. Prime Minister Konoe served as the first president. The goal is to promote the new order movement, which is essentially the centralized reorganization of the fascist regime. Kunio Kishida served as the first culture minister of the Imperial Rule Assistance Association. He incorporated Mingei into the concept of "life culture," strongly advocated by the new order. The positive, popular, daily, internal, unified, healthy, and productive culture of "life culture" has similarities with Mingei. In the 3rd point of Article 5 "maintaining and carrying forward local cultural traditions" in "New Construction of Local Culture", he clearly wrote "guiding the preservation and healthy development of Mingei". In 1942, the life culture class was listed as the No. 1 Department in the class system, indicating that "life culture" is the leading concept of the cultural movement of the IRAA. The "report on wartime life culture" published in 1943 reveals that "life culture" is a means of mass mobilization; that is, life should serve war; culture is life, so culture should serve war.

Strangely, Mingei activists led by Yanagi Sōetsu actively embraced the new order movement. He showed his initiative at the beginning of "the problem of new systems and craft beauty: the Mingei movement has been going on for more than ten years. Now the new order has been implemented everywhere. We have long put forward the idea that we need to establish a national formal social organization to implement the concept of Mingei. Fortunately, in extraordinary times, this reform was achieved rapidly. For this reason, the new order required by this country is an excellent opportunity for the realization of the concept of Mingei" Yanagi Sōetsu recognized Kishida's local cultural construction policy and believed that through the cooperation of Mingei, the society can recover to a healthy and beautiful state and use local Mingei to construct the whole country of Japan: "The way of handcraft relies mostly on the traditions and materials of the earth, which will inevitably reflect the distinctive national characteristics. It can be said that such folk crafts are more prosperous locally than in cities. Recently, the value of local culture has been reassessed in order to rebuild a country with characteristics, so this is the basic work that must be carried out. The unique performance of the country now depends on local Mingei, which is not exaggerated. It is the only way to use Mingei as a straightforward and concrete expression of national character. Only when Mingei is healthy and developed can it be displayed in the world with a unique national image." However, Yanagi Sōetsu only saw trees but not forests, ignoring the evil attribute of "unhealthy" fascist Japan as a whole. The Mingei movement's embrace of the new order will not bring health to Japanese society but help its tyranny. So far, Yanagi Sōetsu's Mingei and Miki Kiyoshi's life culture were initially alienated into a simple fascist war tool in order to realize a certain social transformation desire of "healthy development".

In fact, the alienation of Mingei can be seen as early as its scope of activities. Mingei activities were not limited to Japan but rapidly expanded to various colonies and semi-colonies of the Japanese empire with Japan's aggression. Mingei is not only Japanese Mingei; it also merged Korea, Okinawa, North and Northeast China, Taiwan Province of China, and other places' folk crafts into Mingei. In the 1920s, Korea

strongly resisted Japanese rule. Yanagi Sōetsu's efforts to solve the "Japan-Korea" problem through cultural activities in the 1920s have been accepted, which is beneficial to the establishment of a regime with a relatively reconciliatory culture in Korea. Therefore, Yanagi Sōetsu's projects and visits in Korea have received direct or indirect support from the Japanese government. By the 1930s, Korea had been assimilated into a relatively stable colony of the Japanese fascist empire. Yanagi Sōetsu was already interested in Okinawa culture during his studenthood. He began to investigate Okinawa in 1938 in an attempt to infer Ryukyu culture into pure Japanese culture in order to seek the legitimacy of rule in Japan. In 1938, Yoshida Shoya joined the Japanese army in North China and gradually promoted the practice of Mingei there. With the support of the military, he tried to establish a colonial handicraft economy; the Manchuria Mingei activities presided over by Shikiba Ryusaburo from about 1942 were also controlled by the military, advocating the hypocritical ideas of "harmony of five nations" and "king's promised land" of "Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Manchurian and Mongolian"; in 1943, Yanagi Sōetsu visited Taiwan for Mingei research entrusted by the Oriental Art International Research Association and the Japanese folk crafts museum, soon after the investigation, the "Taiwan governor's office" established an organization called "Life Culture Revitalization Association" on this basis to promote the craft revitalization activity called "Taiwan Modeling Culture Movement" and strengthen colonial rule.

Conclusion

Mingei originated in 1914 (Taisho 3), when the Yi Dynasty pottery "faceted jar with autumn flower design" was given to Yanagi Sōetsu, and it was only 4 years after Korea completely became a Japanese colony. It can be said that the birth of Mingei was accompanied by the oppression of the Japanese Empire and the humiliation of the Korean people. Yanagi Sōetsu's work in Korea and the Mingei that came into being were used by the Japanese government to serve colonial rule. Although the birth of Mingei is full of Yanagi Sōetsu and others' beautiful vision of "healthy" social reform, even in the period of "Taisho Democracy," when

Mingei was born, the booming democratic movements have not been able to change the immorality and illegality of the Japanese government. Because it is still the continuation of the Japanese empire that pursued social Darwinism, foreign aggression, and expansion policies after the Meiji Restoration in 1868. It still carried out cruel colonial or semicolonial rule in Korea, Ryukyu, the Taiwan province of China, and North and Northeast China. The birth of Japanese Mingei was influenced and shaped by imperialism, colonialism, nationalism, industrialism, and capitalism. Such Mingei did not have the ability to let the government return to good, nor the courage to break with the government and fight to the end. Therefore, the local reforms brought about by the Mingei of "health", "soundness", "simplicity", "nature", "freedom", "clumsy", "casualness", moisture," and "full of life" can only become the ruling tool of the "unhealthy" government. Eventually, it was inevitable to be alienated into the means of integrating the "Asian Empire" of the Showa fascist regime.

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