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HEALTHY BEAUTY IN SOETSU YANAGI'S AESTHETICS

SHINOHARA, HANAKO
UNIVERSITY OF TSUKUBA
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

Ms. Hanako Shinohara
Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences
University of Tsukuba

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Synopsis:

This paper explores the meaning of healthy beauty in the context of Soetsu Yanagi's writings on Japanese beauty with thinking on an ideal Japanese man during the 15 years war times in Japan.

PhD Candidate Hanako Shinohara
University of Tsukuba,
Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences,
Doctoral Program in Modern Languages and Cultures

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A Study of healthy beauty in Japanese art and craft world focusing on Yanagi Soetsu and his *Mingei Undo* (folk-craft movement) from 1926 to the early 1940s.

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Introduction

Soetsu Yanagi (1889-1961) is a Japanese aesthetician and a founder of *Mingei Undo* (the folk-craft movement¹) started from 1926. The Japan Folk Crafts Museum, established in 1936 by Yanagi, carries on Yanagi's *Mingei* theory through collecting folk-crafts and holding exhibitions and supports activities to raise awareness and interest in folk-crafts countrywide in Japan². During the *Meiji* period (1868-1912), Japan imported modern ideas from the west and struggled with finding Japanese originality independent from western ideas. Yanagi was born in 1889 and spent his younger years between Japanese traditional culture and western modernism. The result was that his folk-craft theory criticizes that western modernism, mechanization, individualism and capitalism³. This paper will focus on the idea of healthy beauty in Yanagi's *Mingei* theory as a key idea that overlapped with the national policies and movements of Japanese nationalism and militarism during the Fifteen Years War and the Pacific War.

Nationalism and Western Art in the *Taisho* Period: Shino-Japanese Painting, *Nanga*, and Post-impressionism and Expressionism

At the beginning of the modernization of art in the *Meiji* period, the Japanese government used the translated word *bijyutsu*, fine arts, when Japan joined the *Weltausstellung* 1873 in Vienna. There was no exact concept to explain "fine art" in Japanese. Therefore, the Japanese government needed a word to indicate "fine art" in Japanese to describe Japanese culture to other countries. To build an art world in Japan on the level of the one that was already established in the western countries, the

government hired western artists and craftsmen to learn western art in Japan. The government also founded Tokyo School of Fine Arts in 1889 and created exhibitions such as the Ministry of Education Art Exhibition in 1907⁴. During the process of building the art world in Japan, arts terms were translated into Japanese. These genres included fine art, painting, sculpture, craft, historical painting, war painting, realism, and so on. In addition, the translation of western modern art into Japanese meant that the Japanese government would implant western modern art thoughts to Japanese artists⁵. However, while the Japanese art world, in accordance with the Japanese government's policies, was consolidating its influence on Japanese culture, individualism and liberalism emerged during a movement that aimed to push democracy and liberalism in politics, society, and culture during the *Taisho* period (1912-1926). This liberal movement was referred to as *Taisho* Democracy.

Spreading liberalism in Japan from the late *Meiji* to the early *Taisho* period, new individual art groups were being born at the time. One of the representative literature and art magazines in the *Taisho* period was *Shirakaba* (White Birch) (1910-1923), which made liberalism and individualism its focus. *Shirakaba* was staffed with young Japanese writers and artists such as Saneatsu Musanokoji, Naoya Shiga, Takeo Arishima, Ryusei Kishida, and Soetsu Yanagi, most of whom were alumni of *Gakushuin* University. As the magazine was based on individualism and liberalism, it introduced post-impressionism and expressionism artists and art works. These two art styles appeared to create art from individual and subjective views, unlike realism, which is one of the main styles of the Japanese academy. Moreover, a Japanese sculptor, Kotaro Takamura, published an article to promote individuality and subjectivity of the modern arts. The title of the article was "*Midoriiro no taiyo* (The Green Sun)" and it was published in the literary magazine *Subaru* in 1910. In this article, Takamura insists that if someone colors the sun green, people should not blame him or her because the green sun might be true from that person's perspective. Takamura's article is one of the earliest articles to explain the ideas of expressionism and individuality in modern art. Post-impressionism and expressionism became counterparts to the academic art of the 19th century, which was based on realism.

While the post-impressionism and expressionism became counterparts of art in Japanese academy, there was some interpretation to use subjectivity in these two art styles as an evident to show preceding modernity in pre-modern Japanese art. This idea came from nationalism to show Japanese authenticity that is independent from western modernism. The discourse on nationalism and art via expressionism started with Toyozo Tanaka's "*Nanga Shinron* (New Theory of Literati Painting)" in the art magazine *Kokka* in 1912. *Kokka* is an authentic Japanese art magazine published beginning in

1889 and Tanaka was one of its editors⁶. According to Tanaka, *nanga* is not a realistic style of painting used to imitate nature but is rather a form of expressionism used to show poetic implications. Therefore, *nanga* could be a form of modern art, although it started in the pre-modern period, *Edo*, in 18th century Japan⁷. In Tanaka's logic, *nanga* has a longer history than expressionism in the 20th century, thus Japanese modernism started much earlier than western modernism.

It was the time for the Empire of Japan to show its independence from western modernization. The military could show it by a victory in the Japanese-Russo War (1904-05). Although, prior to the Japanese-Russo War, people in Japan believed that the west was more advanced than Japan, Japanese people's feelings of inferiority in comparison to western countries was beginning to decrease after the war. In Tanaka's writing, he does not talk about which is superior or inferior but rather focuses on the commonality between post-impressionism and expressionism and *nanga*. This could be interpreted to mean that Tanaka started to see Japan not as an inferior country but rather as a powerful one, the same as western countries. Chiba analyzes Tanaka's argument that someone who is a blind adorer of the West or Shino-China is living in the old age and people in the new age should not just study and accept western thought but recognize that western thought is just one thinking in the world⁸. In addition, according to Chiba, Tanaka suggests Japanese people to shift their mind from receiver of western idea to creator new thinks to combine Japanese traditional thought and western thought⁹. Tanaka's theory on *nanga* is one example to show shift of Japanese self-image inferior to west countries to equal as western countries. There were more articles to show modernity and modernism in Japanese art and culture comparing with western modern arts throughout 1910s to 1920s. Supported by the theory comparing *nanga* and post-impressionism and expressionism, the discourse that Japanese art could be more "modern" or equally "modern" as western modern art became a major discourse in Japanese art world in 1910s and 1920s¹⁰.

Upsurge of Nationalism in Japan: The Concept of Health in Art in the Early 1940s

Throughout the 1930s, nationalism was growing in Japan, building up to World War II and the Pacific War. As militarism was becoming powerful after the breaking out of the Fifteen Years War (1931-1945), cooperation on the home front was required in various fields including arts and crafts. The concept of health relating to militarism emerged in the art world. This concept became one of ideal beauty in Japanese art. This paper will focus on Soetsu Yanagi's idea of health and beauty in his folk-craft movement theory that began in 1926. Yanagi's argument and aesthetic had a unique position in nationalistic Japanese art, especially in the New Organization Movement (*Shintaisei Undo*), started in 1940.

The New Organization Movement in 1940 was aimed at establishing totalitarianism and state socialism in not only political frameworks but also in culture and art, in order to build a strong military state in the face of growing tension between America and Japan¹¹. The main point of the movement was to strengthen militarism and maximize human resources for the military. Therefore, being healthy became quite important for all Japanese citizens and it also grew into a key term with which to talk about beauty. For instance, Kotaro Takamura wrote the article, “*Bi no kenkosei* [Health on Beauty]”, and which starts the sentence to declare that the quality of beauty is healthy¹². In addition, the regulation of manufacturing and selling luxury products under the New Organization Movement started in July 1940. It was more than the regulation of materials; indeed, it was the regulation of thoughts and content in art works. According to Kobayashi, late 1940 and early 1941 was the time when discussions regarding the new framework and regulations were activated the most in the art world¹³. Some artists were in agreement with the new movement and made art works to encourage people during wartime, while some artists showed anxious because the government was trying to control their materials and thoughts¹⁴. The statement of the aesthetic for wartime was needed for the art world to keep pace with the wartime government policies: one of the requirements of beauty was healthy beauty.

One of the well-known articles on the New Organization Movement in the art world is “*Shintaisei to Kogei-bi no mondai* [Issue on the New Organization Movement and Beauty of Crafts]” in the October issue of *Gekkan Mingei* in 1940 by Soetsu Yanagi who welcomed the New Organization Movement and the regulation of manufacturing and selling luxury products started in 1940¹⁵. The special topic of the October issue was “*Mingei* and the New Organization Movement.” In the beginning of the issue, *Mingei Kyokai* [the Japan Folk Craft Society] states that, as a member of the Japanese nation, they will cooperate and act in agreement with the New Organization Movement. The Japan Folk Craft Society insisted on promoting ethnic and healthy beauty in qualified folk-crafts¹⁶. According to the Japan Folk Crafts Society’s logic, the healthy folk-crafts would bring healthy life for people; in that way, folk-crafts could contribute to the purpose of the New Organization Movement: to build a highly militarized state. From the beginning of the *Mingei* movement, people joining the *Mingei* movement thought that good dairy products make people’s dairy life better. Yanagi criticizes that mass-products items made by machines using western technologies are weak and commercialism and capitalism are bringing Japanese society to a wrong way such as unhealthy society¹⁷. Healthy was one of their terms to explain the beauty to seek in the *Mingei* theory to build a good daily life. Therefore, the statement of the Japan Folk Craft Society in 1940 was based on a slight shift in their focus about ideal life from “better life” to “healthy life,” not

to change their theory in a significant way.

Yanagi explains how the folk-craft movement goes with the New Organization Movement in 10 sections in his article. Key words in the article were handiwork and machine-made crafts, objection to individualism, Japanese tradition, *Mingei* and nationality, utility and beauty, health and beauty, price and quality. Among these key terms, Yanagi insists that there are three elements to keep quality of folk-craft, which is getting along with the New Organization Movement: utility, healthy beauty and nationality. These three are not new to describe *Mingei* theory, but Yanagi added a section “The New Organization Movement and the Control of Quality” in the article to explain how important these three were to the movement.

Yanagi thinks that the beauty and quality of folk-crafts maintain a good balance between utility, healthiness, and nationality. If the crafts have strong utility to achieve the intended usage, it automatically could be said that the crafts are beautiful. Therefore, Yanagi says that crafts should not be weak and decorative to pursue the intended purpose as a daily use and crafts are also required to demonstrate social virtue for people¹⁸. Referring to the previous articles by Yanagi, he is comparing his ideal crafts, simple and healthy craft made by divisional cooperation of craftsmen, with decorative and artistic crafts not too easy to use made by an individual artist and craft-man and weak crafts made by machines, when Yanagi says crafts should be simple and strong¹⁹. In other words, Yanagi thinks that people should not be too fragile and sick to achieve their assignment or duty as like utility is required for crafts as an important element. In the next section, Yanagi mentions that healthy beauty is an important criteria and all sickness should be discarded. In addition, the qualities of being simple and strong are important for both folk-crafts and people. Lastly, he says that it is time to develop products holding locality and nationality in order to recognize how much valuable originality Japan has²⁰, although he does not mention more details on designs or motives of crafts. For this reason, Yanagi pays more attention to folk-crafts in local cities because he thinks local folk-crafts are less affected by western modernism and uphold Japanese tradition more than the folk-crafts found in urban cities²¹.

Using the word “healthy” was not strange to Yanagi, since he was a person who wanted to change the “sick” society influenced by western modernism that brings knowledge, mechanization, and individualism into the center of human social activities. Yanagi preferred handiworks and collectives to share works, both of which indicated a healthy society to him. Being healthy or creating healthy crafts strongly relates to people’s daily lives. This is because if people want to be healthier, a change of lifestyle is crucial. Therefore, Yanagi and *Mingei* theory require people to change their daily life

to healthy one to create healthy crafts. Also it requires people to use healthy crafts to make their dairy life healthy. Yanagi wrote that the beauty and virtue require to crafts are also required for people to make better life and society. Comparing early writings and the article in 1940, it is clear that Yanagi emphasized the distinction between sick and healthy in both crafts and people.

Yanagi's emphasis on healthy beauty was compatible with Japanese nationalism for two reasons: first, his idea of healthy beauty was suited to the government's policy of strengthening human resources for Japanese militaries. After understanding the modern meaning of health in the *Meiji* period, the government and Ministry of Home Affairs drove the control of epidemics and physical strengthen. However, in 1935, the spread of tuberculosis caused major damage to the Japanese population, especially young people from 15 to 30 years old²². This crisis changed the health strategy of the Ministry of Health and Welfare to emphasize that Japanese people should be healthy, both physically and mentally. A minister of health, Koichi Kida, made it clear that being healthy shows dedication to the patriotic spirit in 1938²³. In addition, the concept of health expanded to include eugenics influenced by Nazi Germany and the National Eugenic Law enforced in 1941²⁴. Therefore, Yanagi's argument, that utility, health, and nationality are central qualities of crafts and people, was getting key words that the government and Ministry of Health and Welfare to push in the health strategy in the early 1940s. Although Yanagi did not mention that utility for people meant to be good military personnel, utility, meaning a person who achieves their intended purpose, meant being a good soldier under the New Organization Movement, since the movement's main purpose was to maintain a supply of good human resources for the Japanese military.

The second reason is that Yanagi was clearly criticizing western modernism, especially individualism, liberalism, and capitalism. During the emergence of nationalism in Japan in the 1910s after the Japanese-Russo war (1904-05), Japan's self-image was that it was a country equal to western modern countries. However, in the early 1940s, during escalating nationalism, Japanese originality was very much needed to boost the legitimacy of the Empire of Japan. Yanagi's suggestion to pay attention and preserve local culture and tradition was a suggestion for Japanese people to find Japanese originality independent from western modernism.

Conclusion

Yanagi's *Mingei* theory gained sympathy with Japanese nationalism in the early 1940s. Yanagi thought the New Organization Movement could be a great chance to actualize and activate his ideal *Mingei* movement. Tightening the regulation of manufacturing and selling luxury products the early

1940s, some people became collaborators or opportunists; however, Yanagi did not. His *Mingei* theory maintained coherence from the beginning in 1926 throughout the New Organization Movement. He was one of the only people to make objections against the Japanese colonial policy and colonialism in Korea. In addition, Jugaku Bunsho (1900-92), a member of *Mingei undo*, mentions that the reason why the collection of the Japan Folk Craft Museum does not possess weapons from any ages is because Soetsu Yanagi does not like war; he was an antiwar person²⁵. It is true that Yanagi wrote that he is welcoming the New Organization Movement and he is ready to cooperate with it, however, he took a distance from the movement when he realized that the movement is not a solution to make his ideal society and crafts, but it is encouraging the Pacific War.

The paper concludes that healthy beauty and anti-modernism in Yanagi's *Mingei* theory could not have been independent from the wartime ideology and situation throughout the 1930s and early 1940s. The *Mingei* theory is not opportunism. However, when *Minegi* movement made collaboration with the New Organization Movement, *Mingei*'s aesthetic, healthy beauty, could be interpreted as if it indicates people's virtue in the wartime to provide human resources to make a strong military, even though *Minegi* theory does not exactly encourage and support the health policies of the Japanese government.

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¹ Yanagi chose “folk-craft” to explain his Mingei theory in English, not “folk-art.

² There are 11 brunch museums of Mingei in Japan. *The Japan Folk Craft Museum* (<http://www.mingeikan.or.jp/about/association.html>.)

³ Yanagi criticizes Japanese society influenced western modernism from the beginning of his writings on Mingei, for example, *Kogei no Michi* [The Road of Folk-craft] published in 1926.

⁴ The salon of France art world was the model of the art exhibition created by Ministry of Education (568). Turning over from Ministry of Education Art Exhibition, *Tei-ten* Exhibition was founded in 1919 (442). *A Dictionary of Japanese Art Terms*.

⁵ Sato Doshin. *“Nihonbijutsu” Tanjo: Kindainihon no “Kotoba” to Senryaku. [Birth of “Japanese Art”: Modern “Words” and Strategy]*. 6.

⁶ *Kokka* is not only authentic but also nationalistic art magazine since the first issue. Mori revealed that the idea of *Kokka* has a strong relationship with the wartime thought of Japan. It exalted wars, developed magazine’s concept with the change of wartime thoughts, always acted with concert with Japanese imperialism. Mori Rie. “Bijyutsu zasshi Kokka to Senso: Nichiro senso kara Beigunsenryoki made Nihonbijyutsushi kenkyu wo sasaeta shiso [Art Magazine *Kokka* and War: The Concept Supporting Study of Japanese Art History from Japanese-Russo War to The Allied Occupation]” 27.

⁷ Tanaka Toyozo. “Nanga Shinron 1 [New Theory of Literati Painting 1]” 233-234.

⁸ Chiba Kei. “Nihonbijyutsu shisho no Teikokusyugika [Imperializing Japanese Art]” 62.

⁹ Chiba..

¹⁰ Chiba. 62.

¹¹ Kobayashi Shunsuke. “Bijyutsukai ‘Henkaku’ no riso to genjitsu: Shintaiseika no bijyutsu wo megutte [Ideal and Reality in the Transformation of the Art World: Art Under the New Organization Movement]” 691.

¹² Takamura Kotaro. “Bi no kenkosei [Health in Beauty]”. 283.

¹³ Kobayashi. 692.

¹⁴ A Japanese painter, Hakutei Ishii, is a person who made a cautious opinion on the change brought by the New Organization Movement. He points out that the movement would lead controlling of materials, declining avant-garde arts, and Statism of Japan. “*Shintaisei to Bijyutsu* [The New Organization and Art].” November 1940.

¹⁵ Konabyashi, 705.

¹⁶ The Japan Folk-craft Society, 414.

¹⁷ Yanagi.32.

¹⁸ Yanagi. 409.

¹⁹ Yanagi. “Kogei no bi” 31.

²⁰ Yanagi. 409

²¹ Yanagi. “Kenkosei to bi [Health and Beauty].” 231.

²² Fujino Yutaka, *Kyoseisareta Kenko* [Forced Health]. 17.

²³ Fujino. 25.

²⁴ Osada Kenichi’s research shows that Mingei movement in 1940 was influenced by Nazi Germany’s concept of beauty of labor and strength through joy. “ ‘Binokuni’ Nippon to sono jitsugen no yume: Mingei undo to ‘Shintaisei’ ”. 363.

²⁵ Jugaku Bunsho and Ubukata Naoyoshi. “Yanagi Soetsu wo kataru” 84.