

Reviving Japanese “Traditional” Industries: Prospects and Strategies for Asian Regional Integration¹

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Abstract

In the 1980s, most Asian traditional craft industries severely declined, deeply impacted by the process of globalization. Japan’s craft industry was no exception, and in looking for new ways to expand the shrinking domestic market for crafts, 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 an appreciation for traditional commodities among Asian neighbors.

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

This paper investigates the case 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.

1. Introduction

In the 1980s, most Asian traditional craft industries severely declined, deeply impacted by the process of globalization.² For most developed nations, the causes of the decline were the rapid economic growth in 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, these goods have been relegated as traditional crafts, and their domestic production and distribution is in a state of crisis. This is confirmed in a statement made by Urushihara in 2004, a member of the Association for the Promotion of Traditional Crafts Industries and researcher at the School of Policy Studies, Hosei University, Tokyo:

“One major factor behind the slump [in] the demand for traditional crafts in Japan is the preference towards homogenization that has affected culture and lifestyle as a result of expanded globalization. [Examples of the decline in demand are] 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 [sic].”³

Thus the producers of Japanese traditional crafts are desperately seeking new markets and

consumers for their craft-goods, not only domestically, but especially among their neighbors in Asia. While some scholars may suggest that such economic trade and investment opportunities are the basis for regional integration,⁴ this paper argues that Asian regional integration may only be achieved after the development of a regional identity and, therefore, opportunities for the development of a common identity must be explored. Traditional craft cooperatives can provide such opportunities, not only as the production of commodities but with the prospect of 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 crafts persons could form a foundation for mutual understanding of values and culture to thereby increase Japan's opportunities for regional integration activities. Comparable craft traditions exist for lacquerware, ceramics, 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 that, in sharing with the region, could be a bridge of common values in an effort to build more than just an economic region.

Furthermore, it is proposed that these types of community-building craft cooperation initiatives could be regarded as a central part of integration within the Asian region, as they will contribute to the enhancement of social and economic development of the member countries using crafts as an agent of development and social cohesion. It may be 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, this paper will examine cultural-theoretical approaches to globalization and regionalism thus far, where it is argued that much of the scholarly literature focuses on processes of regionalism as related to economics.⁵ Then craft is described as something linked to identity and value to be used as a starting point or tool for integration. Finally, the paper presents a review of the current situation of traditional craft in Japan and provides strategies for integration based on the preliminary investigation of the case of the Japanese Kiso Lacquerware Cooperative with Myanmar.

2. Theoretical Approach: Where Is the “Social” in Asian Regional Integration?

The volume of literature on Asian regional integration to date emphasizes the economic features in regionalism. Higgots, for instance, defines regionalization as processes 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,”⁶ while Breslin observes that regionalization involves “processes by which societies and economies become integrated—particularly but not only in the economic sphere.”⁷ However, to sociologists interested in the construction of identity for societies and regions, which have the potential to embrace a common set of values, a genuine lack of discourse on the non-economic aspects such as identity in regional integration is evident. Few scholars have addressed how regions with economic and political arrangements⁸ have enhanced their social cohesion and/or determined issues of relations concerning distinct cultural groups.⁹

In sociology, cultural approaches to economic growth and regional development 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. Within sociology, there are two broad arguments.

First, with the weakening of global and political-ideological conflicts, economic and politi-

cal regionalism has become more common. Of course this has not been immediate, but has been a process of gradual development over a number of decades.¹⁰ Parallel to this ideological debate, a cultural debate has arisen and been attached to various political and economic indicators. 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.*¹¹

Therefore, socially or culturally based arguments often underscore the homogenizing consequences of the forces of globalization. In some cases, they highlight the unpleasant effects 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 globalization.¹² 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.”¹³ Also, Fukuyama argues that the spread of free-market economics and democratic politics is a process which “guarantees an increasing homogenization of all human societies, regardless of their historical origins or cultural inheritances.”¹⁴

3. What Function Could Social and Cultural Values Serve For the Prospect of Integration?

This question is under-explored and answers to it are ambiguous at best. What is unclear is the prospect of creating a common social or cultural community, and what is necessary to define or even understand what those values or commonalities might be. The concept of common identity for regional integration relies upon a number of assumptions, which have serious methodological and practical problems.

First, the construct of a regional or national identity is founded on the idea that the components that characterize a nation tie sub-cultures together within a national boundary. Keillor and Hult suggest that national identity has four components: cultural identity or a set of meanings that set it apart from other cultures; a belief structure facilitating cultural participation and solidarity; national heritage defined as a sense of the culture's unique history; and ethnocentrism, the way in which individuals or societies make judgments and attributions using their own cultural perspectives as baseline criteria.¹⁵ National identity is therefore an abstraction, an imagined communion,¹⁶ whereby individuals are united not by a geographical space but by a collective identity.¹⁷ In fact, Despres argues that this identity can be self-ascribed and need not correspond to identities that others impose, with the most important criterion being that individuals want to belong to a group.¹⁸ Therefore, national culture, or the signs and symbols of such identity, is a way of constructing meanings that influence people's actions and conceptions of self.¹⁹

The challenge in constructing or imagining a common Asian identity is that doing so means that social, economic, and political characteristics of Asian countries are based upon shared val-

ues which are identifiable and distinct, and which transcend national, religious, and ideological differences. The arguments presented thus far in the literature posit Asia 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.²⁰ The role of common values, identity, and regionalism, however, is a matter of debate. Scholars such as Leifer who have adopted a perspective based on international relations have minimized the importance of values, seeing them as being “convenient instruments of states.”²¹ In spite of this view, the importance of social, cultural or common values cannot be easily discounted with respect to the idea of Asian regional integration. Early functionalists like Karl Deutsch²² identified the formation of common identity as the driving force of regional institutional integration.

The second challenge is that regional integration appears to occur at the official and elite levels, where value struggles seem to be most often presented as economic aspects of regionalism. This approach effectively dismisses the concept of a grassroots-level regionalism, or regionalism among the people. The tendency is to emphasize the role that economics plays in regionalism.

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 of its regional members who heed their economic and geopolitical interests for the region over any sense of shared belonging. These interests are often economic in nature, and this favor 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. Acharya, 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.*²³

Examining regional integration requires a comprehensive, balanced analysis of its formal and informal characteristics. At the institutional (formal) level, integration addresses “official” aspects like economy and security, while at the informal level, it refers, as Rumley suggests, to “a sense of belonging or feelings of community in a social or cultural sense—that is, it is a construct associated with identity.”²⁴ 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].”²⁵ Even if a regional sense of values is vague in Asia, such sense is necessary to further common interests and initiatives.

4. Japanese Traditional Crafts: Common Ground for Integration

Traditional crafts may be considered unique in comparison to other commodities that are frequently used in the construction of a society’s local, national, or global identity. In the following analysis, it is necessary to subscribe to the beliefs of anthropologists who take “objects seri-

ously,” like Douglas, who regards material objects as “carriers of meaning,”²⁶ and Miller, who emphasizes that objects are constructed as social forms.²⁷ Crafts are defined as products that are created 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.²⁸

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.²⁹ The common assumption underlying craft objects made or modified by humans is that those objects can reflect the belief patterns of individuals, and of the larger society to which they belong. 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.³⁰

Japanese crafts are said to be a reflection of Japan’s “traditional past” and are 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. It is also presented as distinctive from production in other Asian areas; but at the same time, Japanese craft is also viewed as a unique hybrid of identity influenced greatly by its surrounding Asian neighbors. One could assert that many crafts thought to be indigenous representations are in fact not unique to Japan, as some traditional craft processes were imported or created by Asian immigrants and craftspersons.³¹ 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. The fact 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. As acknowledged by Creighton, the desire to re-capture crafts, or to engage in them as craftspeople, often involves an ideological rejection of commercialism and consumerism.³² 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 (1834–1896), a leader in Britain’s nineteenth century craft re-vitalization movement, the commitment to craft ultimately fostered a commitment to socialist thought. He believed that alleviating economic differentiation was necessary to reach the ideal of paradise on earth, and to allow all people to appreciate the beauty that can potentially exist in everyday life through the close interface with crafted material goods.³³ However, making a living out of craft in the present economic climate usually means catering to an affluent elite.³⁴

5. 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 began protecting intangible cultural properties and traditional craft techniques, and designated the people who make them as “human” or “national” treasures.³⁵ “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.”³⁶ 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 the 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).

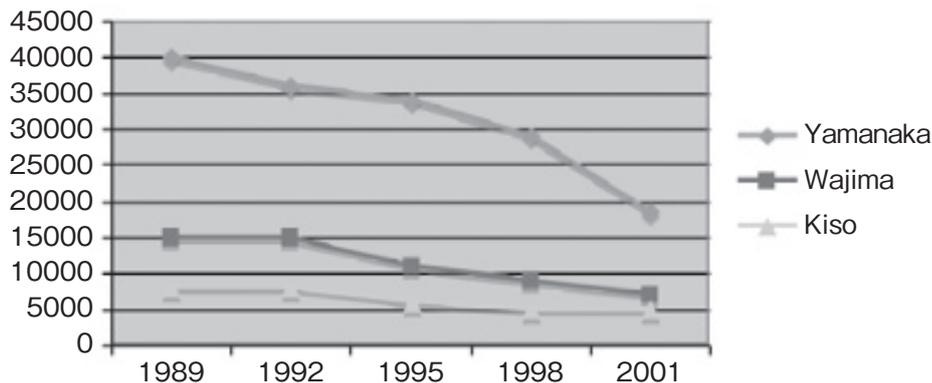
Table 1. The Present Condition of Japan’s Traditional Craftwork Industry

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	177.3 billion yen	540.0 billion yen (1983)
Percentage of craftspeople under 30 years old	6.1%	28.6% (1974)

Source: Association for the Promotion of Traditional Craft Industries, Japan <http://www.kougei.or.jp/english/> (accessed July 1, 2009). Table created by author.

The decline has presented serious economic and social repercussions for Japan’s traditional craft work industry. The decline is obvious in the regions where large-scale traditional craftwork industries have historically been located. For example, the volume of production per annum in Yamanaka Lacquerware in Ishikawa Prefecture 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).

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



Source: Data collected from the Association for the Promotion of Traditional Craft Industries, Japan, <http://www.kougei.or.jp/english/> (accessed July 1, 2009). Figure created by author.

The decrease in demand for traditional crafts has thus reached a state of crisis, shaking the very foundations of the economic, social, and cultural livelihood of traditional Japanese craftspeople. To counter this situation, measures aimed at promoting crafts domestically were implemented by METI and local governments, according to the Law for the Promotion of Tra-

ditional Craft Product Industries enacted in 1974 and re-reformed in 2004. To date, the Ministry has identified over 200 types of traditional crafts that must meet its five conditions (see Table 2), 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

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, Japan, <http://www.kougei.or.jp/english/> (accessed July 1, 2009)

In recent years, the declining 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 the 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, fineness, expression, and aesthetic appreciation of Japanese ideals is essential to the production of handicrafts. It is critical for the products to survive as reflected in this statement:

METI’s efforts to promote traditional Japanese crafts is [sic] done in the hope that the Japanese people as well as the people of the world do not forget the quality of hand-work [sic] 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...but are our contact with something basic and profoundly precious.³⁷

Outside of Japan, while the demand for Japanese crafts is somewhat limited, the demand for Japanese craftspersons 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.³⁸

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; and,
- (4) Be carefully crafted to meet the wishes of cooperative partners.³⁹

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.

6. Case Study: The Kiso Lacquerware Cooperative

(1) Background and History

One type of protected craft that has a following outside of Japan is that of Kiso lacquerware. In 1975 METI (then MITI) designated the craftsmen, the involved processes, and final products of Kiso style lacquerware as traditional crafts. According to the local government in the Kiso Valley, 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, the greatest distinguishing feature of Kiso Lacquerware is the way in which items are lacquered in many layers and designs and painted in different colors of lacquer.⁴⁰ 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.

The idea for the Kiso Myanmar Cooperative came about 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 agreement for technical cooperation. The Narakawa-mura village office then dispatched an exploratory commission to Myanmar, and beginning in 1998, three delegations of master craftspeople were sent to impart their technical skills to local Myanmar craftspeople. 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 the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Japan International Cooperation Agency, and the Council of Local Authorities for International Relations (CLAIR). Initially, this type of cooperation was part of the Specialist Dispatch Project, an international cooperation project initiated by CLAIR.

Under the project, an employee (including retirees) of a Japanese local authority with specialized knowledge or experience is dispatched upon request from an ASEAN local government, to improve technology in the local area, train local personnel, and promote friendly cooperative relations between Japanese and ASEAN's local governments. The main objectives of the Specialist Dispatch Program are to:

- (1) Survey the raw materials of the locality;
- (2) Observe the craftspeople at work to determine their skill levels, and also survey commonplace problems in the traditional methods of manufacturing pottery in the village;
- (3) Provide training on craft techniques; and,
- (4) Offer training on marketing know-how: Participants are given insights into 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' 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, originating from techniques imported from China in the 11th century. The techniques used in Myanmar production are similar to those of the Kiso craftsman's (see Figure 3). Lacquerware production 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; it was 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. 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."⁴¹

(2) Prospects and Challenges for the Cooperative

According to a CLAIR report, "both the socio-economic impacts of the projects were numerous."⁴² Additionally, the Myanmar government has stated that the partners in their country seem to:

*have greatly appreciated the exchange program to dispatch technical instructors and to receive trainees, and [the cooperative project] is thought to be useful in improving craft 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.*⁴³

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."⁴⁴

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. Also, due to the high value placed on Kiso Lacquerware domestically, Japanese officials have concerns about cheaper, lower quality Myanmar-made products flooding the Japanese market as a result of the cooperation project. As for the expansion of lacquerware sales overseas, stable distribution channels have yet to be established.

(3) Is That All?: Future Strategies for Cooperation

While the cooperative was not entirely a success in terms of its economic outcomes for local government officials, for CLAIR, the social and economic aspects are somewhat dependent 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.*⁴⁵

For the artists and trainees involved in the cooperative, it is more that an economic prospect.

One craftsman is 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."⁴⁶

Though the tension between the economic and the social will always exist, with economic prospects first on the minds of officials, 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 neighboring countries and areas such as China, Taiwan, South Korea, Thailand, Myanmar, Vietnam, and Bhutan.

Owing to the exchanges with Myanmar, the local citizenry has acquired a better understanding of Japan, and the experiences gained have led to the development of new products.⁴⁷ For Japanese craftspeople, the sharing of techniques should not be a point of distress; rather, having a point of contact with other cultures could breed ideas for new crafts. They may not find an answer to their dilemma by looking solely at the economic benefits of the exchange and its impacts. There may be ways to thwart the influx of overseas products while building understanding of another's identity, values and culture at the same time. Moreover, as Japan relies heavily on foreign sources of raw materials, the entire production process cannot be domestically self-contained. There is a need to widen the scope of vision and draw together the respective energies of various actors, and ideas for fostering the traditional craft industry should be generated from a "regional" point of view; it is essential that the resulting measures also be implemented from that perspective.

The objective of these types of cooperation should not be wholly focused on economic outcomes or the setting up of institutions. Rather, emphasis should be on enhancing regional cooperation in terms of culture, promoting a better understanding of Asia's civilization, arts, culture, and possibly a common craft heritage. Craft collaboration has the potential to promote mutual respect and greater understanding of Japan and its neighbors' diverse cultural backgrounds, to strengthen the foundations for making a stronger, more cohesive, and more competitive Asian regional community. Further strategic objectives should also consider:

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

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

7. Conclusion

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 cultures of its neighboring nations. This paper has argued that the emphasis thus far on Asian regional integration has been placed primarily on issues of economics and politics and, from that perspective, it has examined the possibility for regional collaboration in the form of traditional

craft cooperatives.

The paper has proposed that economic ties may not only make an Asian identity stronger, but they can also pave the way for a promising Asian community in which common values and cultural underpinnings are based on similarities in the production of traditional craft goods. Traditional craft embedded in identities, values, and cultures 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 the countries involved to focus on the sharing of grassroots commonalities, beginning with traditional goods that represent meaning and value.

However, future research and initiatives need to be undertaken to understand the concerns of the producers, craftsmen, and local organizations. Many questions remain to be explored concerning the role of identity, value, and culture. Whether and how much identity and value matter as an independent variable to regional integration is also a question that requires further inquiry. Moreover, what constitutes an Asian identity, if anything at all? Additional study is also needed on the types of approaches that might be mutually beneficial for Japanese crafts and their cooperation partners, to protect their techniques and human resources so that they feel comfortable sharing tradition.

A longer-term objective of future research might be to explore ways for Japan to collaborate with its neighbors in the creation of crafts not necessarily unique to Japanese identity and pride, but rather as emblems of a greater Asia that are engaging, appealing and profitable beyond Japanese shores. If that scenario were to come to fruition, it may create a more meaningful discourse about the traditional crafts of Asia and not merely that of a single country. A new vision could be that of a people-centered ASEAN, where cooperation, as opposed to solely government-driven economic regional association exists. A regional awareness of identities and common values would lead to regional cohesion and some level of cooperation among likely member states at the grassroots level. There is hope. The governments of South Korea, Japan, and China agreed to celebrate 2007 as the year of cultural exchanges. In fact, many of the proposed cultural exchanges on that occasion were based on pop culture exchanges, objects with meaning and identity across the various regions.⁴⁸ While continued economic prosperity will accelerate the development of regional integration, an understanding of a common culture or common identity will be susceptible to domestic political whims if it does not surpass the elite level; there is greater strength when values are shared by ordinary citizens throughout the region. Only then may the potential for true regional integration be secured.

Notes

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