

# Exoticism and Nostalgia

## Consuming Southeast Asian Handicrafts in Japan

Textiles and other handmade items from Southeast Asia, have gained unprecedented popularity in recent years. The Japanese consumers, predominantly women, crave stories and 'biographical' details about these goods; they then turn them into their personalized possessions and display them in an effort to express their individuality. The following article explores the language used in Japanese women's magazines depicting these items.

Research >  
Japan

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One of the latest consumer trends in Japan can be glossed as the 'Asian boom' (*ajia-boom*): a social phenomenon in which the consumption of various material objects, mostly textiles and other craft items from 'Asia', has become a craze. Japan is indeed known for its excessive consumerism, yet this latest trend offers a prime example of 'cross-cultural consumption' – a phenomenon that has been subject to increasing analysis in consumer culture studies.

Towards the end of the 1990s, glossy magazines directed at middle-aged, married women started featuring a variety of textiles, basketry, furniture, and tableware from various countries in Southeast Asia, such as Indonesia, Thailand, and Vietnam. Other magazines, targeting a younger readership, soon followed this trend. Such editorial trends correspond to a more general tendency in which increasing attention is paid to various goods from these countries.

While a number of shops offering so-called 'ethnic' merchandise (meaning the cheap range of garments and accessories directly imported from India, Indonesia, or China) already existed, a large number of retail shops, trade fairs, and websites have started to deal in furniture and miscellaneous household goods made of natural materials, such as rattan, bamboo, or teak, since the mid-1990s.



An example of a display of Indonesian handicrafts, Tenmaya Department Store, Okayama, Japan

Given the segmented market structure, both the style and content of women's magazines generally vary according to their narrowly defined readership. Nevertheless, they prove to be somewhat similar in their feature articles related to this 'Asian boom'. The language of the articles is highly eloquent, even verbose. The captions for graphic images also contain a certain set of key terms that appear over and over again. Typical terms for representing Asian-made textiles and handicrafts are 'warmth' (*nukumori*), 'calmness' (*yasuragi*), 'simplicity' (*soboku-sa*), and 'nostalgia' (*natsukashisa*). An uncritical juxtaposition of seemingly incompatible adjectives also prevails: 'Simple, generous, and elegant cloths of Asia'; 'We feel nostalgia though we see them for the first time; above all, they are refreshing'.

The special qualities of these handicrafts are strongly associated with their being the product of attentive and devoted handwork. In other words, it is the time and labour invested that make them special. Most often, therefore, what inspires and attracts consumers are not simply the patterns, colours, or texture of the given items, but the 'context' of their making.

### Cravings for narratives

The general wish of prospective buyers to have detailed knowledge of the sites of production or even of the personal circumstances of producers is clearly voiced in the pages of these magazines. Obviously, however, it is unrealistic for most consumers to have a direct encounter with producers from other cultures. Unlike 'art' objects, even acquiring knowledge of the exact maker of an item of their interest may prove impossible. To compensate for this, the magazine arti-

cles and shop owners are willing to provide some ideas about the context of production in highly romanticized tones.

In many cases, the actual situation surrounding the producers does not correspond with the idyllic description of artisans as appears in commercial discourse, as partially exemplified in my earlier research on Balinese hand-weavers (Nakatani 1999).

From the viewpoint of Japanese consumers, however, such background knowledge of particular objects matters, because 'the imagination works on objects to turn commodities ... into sometimes very significant possessions, which draw their power from biographical experiences and the stories [about them]' (Hoskins 1998:196). Their differentiated and personalized possessions will, in turn, be incorporated into their own stories. The narratives are generally expressed by means of a tasteful display of carefully selected objects on one's central stage: the home.

### Home as feminized space

One of the major characteristics of the recent Asian boom in Japan is its emphasis on the effective use of goods of various origins in home furnishing. In this vein, the lifestyle magazines and books specializing in interior decoration bring two inter-related themes to the fore: the significance of individuality, and the crucial role of one's taste in expressing individuality.

The magazines contain reports of model cases, taken from the homes of selected readers as well as some celebrities. The reports include a summary of the essential traits of a given room/house, detailed depictions of the individual items on display, and the owner's comments. Interestingly, many individuals (predominantly women) stress the fact that their home should be the medium of expressing their sense of style and, by extension, individuality (*watashi-rashisa*).

For example, a woman who skilfully coordinates furniture and decorative items of varied style and origin declares: 'The entire interior of my house is an aggregate of the things that have attracted me'. Her successful arrangement is attributed to her 'discerning eye', selecting only high-quality items (*Plus One Living* 2000:35). Another woman describes her home as 'a stage for my favourite things': the space that 'becomes more and more like herself as she decorates it' (*Plus One Living* 2000:33).

In the words of Featherstone (1987, p.59), these people seem to represent 'the new heroes of consumer culture', who 'make lifestyle a life project and display their individuality and sense of style in the particularity of the assemblage of goods'. As a number of critics of contemporary consumer culture have pointed out, individuality, self-expression, lifestyle, and choice are all essential key terms in understanding the consumers in the postmodern era. And perfect expression of individuality can only be achieved by a discerning judgement – which, in itself, is an important cultural construction.

By feeling somehow connected with unknown producers through social imagery, and by successfully incorporating their products into their own lifestyle, Japanese consumers try to demonstrate their integrated, not fragmented, self and individuality. But it should also be noted that this space for the display of individuality is gendered: the home, in this sense, represents the lone, if not empty, self of women.

In an analysis of new marketing strategies, it is said that the Japanese home has lost its centrality as a symbol of family bonding. Now the home is just a container in which the family members, who lack united concerns, remain, expressing 'their individuated selves' (HILL 1985:64–65). At the same time, the home has been increasingly deemed a women's (that is, wife's) space, as men's absence from it has become the norm, owing to the long hours of work involved in the process of post-Second World War industrialization. We also find popular novels or TV dramas characterizing the young, faithful wife who gradually overshadows her husband by decorating their home entirely to her own taste. There are other begging questions to be raised: Why should these women desire the objects of cultural others? Do they want to compensate for the lack of unselfish, unlimited motherly love in their own lives, as expressed through the painstaking labour of producing intricate handwork? Do they mourn the

loss of tradition, the past times when their own daily life was filled with such handmade crafts? It is here that the rhetoric of nostalgia, one of the most frequently used terms to characterize Asian crafts, comes into play.

### Ambivalent positioning of 'Asia'

'The term "Oriental" (*orientaru*) somehow sounds formal or distant. How about "Asia" (*ajia*), then? Instantly the latter gives a sense of comfort, for perhaps our instinct tells us it is the place where Japan is included, where we belong' (*Belle Maison* mail-order catalogue, Spring 2001).

'European tableware, imbued with Orientalism, renews our appreciation of Eastern aesthetics. "Japanese" materials, including lacquer, fit well with that kind of Western tableware. Let's try a sophisticated coordination with an image of "the East viewed from the West"' (*Fujin Gaho*, June 2000).

These two quotations illustrate particular formulations surrounding the tripartite relationship of Japan, Asia, and the West. Both of them, in fact, express some uneasiness towards the term 'Oriental' or 'Orientalism', for it is essentially the Western view of Asia, not theirs.

The first passage in particular stresses the 'Asianess' of Japan – Japan as firmly merged with Asia, though geographical specificity is never given. According to *Belle Maison*, the sense of nostalgia evoked by Asian handicrafts can be justified by the existence of an ancestral connection. Thus the shared memory is there, and is only waiting to be called back. It is equally noted that Asia, including Japan, is the 'other' to the West.

Yet the Japanese tend to appreciate such an Orientalist gaze; they internalize the West's exotic image of themselves. The second quotation comes from an article on table-setting entitled 'A Table of Asian Taste', which depicts Western tableware using Oriental motifs and bamboo trays or Japanese lacquer ware. As the text affirms, an Orientalist view of Asia, Japan included, is seen as providing a refreshing appreciation of their own culture and tradition.

However, the Japanese would be equally ready to distance themselves from the category of Asia and, thus, objectify it. The otherness of Asia comes from the difference in ways of life, and its exotic attractiveness as tourist destination; Asia is distanced from Japan both temporally and culturally. From the consumer's perspective, therefore, the Japanese cast the same gaze upon Asia as their Western counterparts.

In this light, a peculiar juxtaposition of seemingly conflicting sentiments such as nostalgia and exoticism in the magazine's texts can be explained by Japan's ambivalent position vis-à-vis the rest of the Asian region and the West. Either including or excluding Japan, 'Asia' is a cultural as well as historical construct, largely informed by the Western view that, subsequently, has been internalized by the Japanese consumers. They exoticize themselves as Asian/Oriental, in which case they are merged with the rest of Asia but, at the same time, they objectify and present the latter as their cultural other. <

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