

# Kingdom of Beauty

MINGEI AND THE POLITICS OF FOLK ART IN IMPERIAL JAPAN



KIM BRANDT



*Kingdom of Beauty*

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*For Vincent and Hi Kyung Brandt*



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## Introduction

In many parts of the world, the years after World War I witnessed an upsurge of interest in the lives of those groups ordinarily relegated to the margins of modern, industrial society. One consequence was the discovery of various types of “primitive” and “folk” art. First collectors and artists, and later a broader public, began to admire not only the art and artifacts produced by tribal peoples of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas, but also the work of outsiders closer to home, such as children, immigrants, the insane, and the rural folk of both the present and the past. Interest in these groups was, of course, not new in the early twentieth century. The modern study of folklore, for example, had its beginnings a century earlier, in the efforts of German and British scholars to unearth what they romanticized as the surviving vestiges of ancient national traditions.<sup>1</sup> The emergence of the Arts and Crafts movement in 1880s England, and shortly thereafter in other parts of Europe and in the United States, partook of the same nineteenth-century impulse to idealize the national past; at the same time, it was shaped by an antimodernist reaction against urban industrialization and promoted, ironically, by the habits of domestic consumption among a rising bourgeoisie.<sup>2</sup> And there were even older antecedents to the interwar discovery of folk culture. In Japan and China, for example, twentieth-century interest in the folk was informed not only by earlier developments in Europe and the United States, but also by much older, indigenous histories of curiosity among the literati about rural customs, lore, and material culture.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, the middle-class intellectuals who embraced folk culture and folk art in 1920s Tokyo or

in Beijing, or Berlin, Paris, Dublin, New York, or Mexico City, were also doing something new, for reasons and in ways that were peculiar to their own, very modern moment.<sup>4</sup>

This book takes as its subject the rise of folk art in Japan. By focusing on folk art in prewar and wartime Japan, and in particular on the activities of those collectors and artists associated with what would later become known as the *mingei*, or “folk-craft,” movement, this study seeks to illuminate yet another aspect of Japan’s modern experience as a nation-state struggling to find its place within a highly unequal international order. It might reasonably be asked why, in telling the story of folk art in Japan, I have chosen to focus on the advocates of *mingei* and not on the many other groups who admired and studied the arts and crafts of rural Japan. After all, Tokyo in the 1920s and 1930s was bustling with aesthetes and scholars preoccupied with the objects they called, variously, *minzoku geijutsu* (folk art), *nōmin bijutsu* (farmers’ art), *mingu* (folk implements), *nōmin tekōgei* (peasant handicrafts), or *kyōdo gangu* (local toys), to name just a few terms. The most immediate and obvious reason is that the *mingei* group won the contest to define folk art in Japan. By the end of World War II, *mingei* as a term and idea had received official approval and ratification from the Japanese state. A decade or two later, *mingei*, a neologism coined in the late 1920s, was well on its way to becoming a household word, a widely diffused type of commodity, and a seamless part of the common sense of Japanese cultural identity. Nor has the dissemination of *mingei* been restricted to Japan. Unlike the various other candidates that jostled in the 1920s and 1930s to name the ceramics and textiles and other artifacts of the preindustrial Japanese farm household, the category of *mingei* has been exported successfully to North America and Western Europe, where it is commonly employed by museum curators, art dealers, collectors, and the like.

In many respects, we can understand the emergence of folk art in Japan as part and parcel of a more common, indeed a global, phenomenon. As in other parts of the early-twentieth-century world where the primitive aesthetic found increasing favor, the Japanese discovery of folk art was shaped by imperialism and colonialism, by new strains of nationalist thought and feeling, and by the structures and processes of industrial capitalism. Japan’s experience was thus similar to that of many other modernizing countries, and the story of *mingei* is one that compares readily to the story of folk art in bourgeois nation-states everywhere. Yet there are also important differences to be noted in the Japanese case.

The rise of *mingei* was also shaped by the peculiarities of Japan's condition as a late-developing, non-Western society in a world order dominated by the industrialized Western powers. In seeking to build a modern nation-state capable of resisting European and U.S. imperialism, Japan's governing elites undertook to make Japan itself an imperial power—by annexing and colonizing the island of Formosa (Taiwan) in 1895, then Korea in 1910, and by engaging in various types of informal empire in mainland China and later in the Pacific region and Southeast Asia. Chapter 1 considers, therefore, the origins of the Japanese discourse on folk art in the ambivalence of a non-Western imperialism. Several of the young collectors and artists who would later be recognized as key figures of *mingei*—namely, Yanagi Muneyoshi (1889–1961) and his friends and associates—began their careers as champions of folk art by embracing the material culture, and particularly the ceramics, of Korea's Chosŏn period (1392–1910).<sup>5</sup> An examination of the texts produced by Yanagi and others on Korean arts and crafts suggests the pivotal influence of what might be called an Oriental orientalism on the invention of folk art in Japan.<sup>6</sup> At the same time the Japanese appreciation of Korean art, and later of folk art in Japan and elsewhere in Asia, not only reflected Japanese colonial power but also helped to shape and augment it. Thus chapter 1 explores the specific ways Yanagi's efforts to celebrate and promote Korean art aided in producing legitimacy for Japanese rule in Korea. Later, during the wartime years of the late 1930s and early 1940s, the definition of *mingei* expanded to include not only Japanese handicrafts, but also the folk art of the Ainu and of Korea, China, Manchuria, Okinawa, and Southeast Asia. Chapter 5 takes up the story of Greater East Asian *mingei* to show that folk art became an integral part of the Japanese state's project to construct and justify an autarchic regional empire in Asia.

The process by which Japan became modern is also distinguished by the nature of the relationship that developed between state and society. In a manner reminiscent of the statist polities of continental Europe, especially Germany, Japanese public life before (and to some degree even after) 1945 was dominated by a powerful bureaucratic state which conceived of itself as a transcendent entity above the society it managed. As Sheldon Garon has argued, however, one especially distinctive feature of the Japanese brand of bureaucratic statism is that it was consistently employed to manage aspects of ordinary, everyday life through campaigns of “moral suasion” featuring the active participation of groups of middle-class reformers.<sup>7</sup> This insight helps to explain the nature of the folk art, or *mingei*, movement. That is, it

offers an explanatory context within which to understand how and why the middle-class intellectuals preoccupied with folk art in the 1920s and 1930s found themselves translating their private predilections into public programs for social and cultural reform. Chapters 2 and 3 show that *mingei*, initially a type of antique curio associated with literati collectors, was redefined to serve as a means both of revitalizing rural society and of producing moral-aesthetic uplift in urban households. The *mingei* movement, which emerged in the early 1930s, gained momentum as certain key collectors and artists sought to achieve greater influence for their ideas by joining with new constituencies, including local elites and the representatives of government agencies.

And yet the story of folk art not only illustrates but also complicates the idea that a collaborative relationship developed in the first half of the twentieth century between Japan's middle class and the imperial state. Chapters 2 and 3 present evidence suggesting that folk art activists were oriented to social reform efforts for reasons that included, but were not limited to, a commitment shared with higher civil servants to the top-down betterment of Japanese society at large. Just as salient, I argue, was the competition between various segments of an increasingly dynamic and complex social "middle." The men who first championed folk culture in the early decades of the twentieth century tended to be the representatives of an older cultural elite whose social power derived from a monopoly on certain forms of educational and aesthetic capital. Their position was challenged, however, by the cultural pretensions of a rising industrial haute bourgeoisie on the one hand, and the emergence of new groups of upwardly mobile men and women gaining access to higher education on the other. The development of the *mingei* movement as a campaign to reform Japanese society in tandem with state initiatives and agencies also represented, therefore, a potent means for one group of middle-class elites to retain and even increase their power and status in the context of a rapidly changing society. As such, it offers another perspective from which to analyze the interaction of middle-class reformers with both state and society.

Finally, close study of *mingei* highlights the special role played by aesthetic capital in the emergence of a distinctively Japanese modernity. As noted earlier, individual taste and standards of aesthetic cultivation were vital to the negotiation of bourgeois class status in early-twentieth-century Japan. Of course, the mastery of tasteful consumption appears to have operated as a crucial means of class distinction in modern capitalist societies

generally.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, in Japan certain forms of aesthetic mastery associated with traditional arts and crafts, and particularly with the practice of the tea ceremony, possessed an unusual degree of social prestige owing to their association with various old as well as new cultures of elite masculinity. This helps to explain the embrace of folk art by new middle-class groups during the 1920s and 1930s, when a rapidly industrializing economy, an expanding educational system, and the growth of cities and suburbs intensified the struggle to define modern bourgeois identity.

Aesthetics also proved useful to the Japanese state in its efforts to promote economic and political power abroad, as well as national integration at home. In this sense Japan's experience bears some resemblance to that of France. Like the nineteenth-century French state, the Meiji government deliberately sought to build upon the international reputation of Japanese decorative arts in order to increase exports and also as a means of enhancing its cultural and political authority.<sup>9</sup> By the early twentieth century, however, the elaborate and luxurious types of art-craft for which Japan was known in the West were becoming the relics of a bygone Victorian era. Costly and inefficient to produce and increasingly difficult to sell, luxury arts and crafts seemed more a liability than an asset—or ornament—to a would-be modern world power. The interwar years were a time of stylistic uncertainty for the Japanese state, therefore, when it was unclear how or even whether it would be possible to continue to capitalize on the idea of a native aesthetic tradition in promoting national goods and identity.

Chapter 4 argues that the prosperity and growth of the *mingei* movement during the late 1930s and early 1940s can be attributed at least in part to the active patronage of the state, which recognized in folk art the potential for an updated national aesthetic. Initially *mingei* appealed to bureaucrats concerned with national industry and trade as a design resource that was both modernist and Japanese and that might therefore revive export markets in Europe and the United States. More significant, however, was the favor folk art found with the “renovationist” or fascist officials and agencies who were determined to mobilize the entire nation, and indeed much of Asia, in the cause of Japan's total war. Government ideologues and propagandists embraced the arts and crafts of an idealized folk as a means of insisting on national, and also imperial, unity. For, as explored in Chapter 5, the folk aesthetic was also put to use as a means of integrating Japan's Asian empire. During the late 1930s and early 1940s, *mingei* activists worked in Korea, Okinawa, Hokkaido (among the Ainu), Manchuria, and Japanese-occupied



China to help construct a Greater East Asian culture of daily life. A judicious blend of native arts and crafts with Japanese technology and taste would produce, they hoped, a new lifestyle free of the yoke of Western commercialism and capable of joining Asians everywhere in the “coprosperity” promised by their Japanese rulers.

Readers familiar with *mingei* will be surprised, perhaps, to find relatively little discussion here of the most famous individuals associated with it. Some of the most distinguished artists of twentieth-century Japan spent all or many of their most productive years as leading figures in the *Mingei* Association. The internationally known artist-potters Hamada Shōji, Kawai Kanjirō, Tomimoto Kenkichi, and Bernard Leach were all closely associated with *mingei*, as were the dyer Serizawa Keisuke, the woodworker Kuroda Tatsuaki, the woodblock print artist Munakata Shikō, and others. The central theorist of *mingei*, the collector Yanagi Muneyoshi, was a prolific writer who early achieved renown as a public intellectual with expertise in literature, philosophy, and religion, as well as in art generally and folk art in particular. Yet while numerous biographies, memoirs, exhibition catalogues, and other studies and compilations dealing with these men and their individual achievements have been published over the years, there has been relatively little attention to the *mingei* endeavor as a larger, collective enterprise. Those relatively few studies that have ventured to treat *mingei* as a larger movement or project have tended to focus primarily on its contributions to the history of Japanese art; as a consequence, the lives and work of artist luminaries such as Kawai and Hamada, or of the presiding genius Yanagi, remain the dominant subjects of study.

I have sought instead to approach *mingei* less as a given genre of art and more as a changing cultural and social category that was created and negotiated by many more individuals, groups, and institutions than those enumerated by the standard narrative. This study focuses on the critical period between 1920 and 1945—which includes the often overlooked “dark valley” of the wartime years—to explore the role played in defining and promoting folk art not only by Yanagi and his artist friends, but also by a host of lesser known figures: provincial intellectuals and collectors, local artisans, government officials, merchants, magazine editors, and middle-class shoppers. I hope that what this book has given up in close attention to the biographies of the great men of *mingei*, it makes up in the alternative, broader perspective offered on the field of cultural production in modern Japan.

## ONE. *The Beauty of Sorrow*

In the fall of 1914 Asakawa Noritaka, a Japanese schoolteacher in colonial Korea, paid a call on Yanagi Muneyoshi at his home in Chiba prefecture, outside Tokyo. Asakawa brought from Korea a Chosŏn-period ceramic jar, which he presented to his host.<sup>1</sup> The story has it that the twenty-five-year-old Yanagi fell in love with this object and that it helped to inspire in him a passionate interest in Korean arts and crafts generally. While Yanagi's fascination with Korean art persisted throughout his life, it was during the decade immediately following Asakawa's visit that he most avidly collected, appreciated, and promoted things Korean. Between 1914 and 1924, Yanagi made as many as ten trips to Korea, often staying for weeks at a time. In addition to building up his own celebrated collection of Korean ceramics and other objects, he devoted much of this period to writing a book and numerous articles on Korean art and related subjects, as well as giving well-attended public lectures in both Korea and Japan. He also joined with friends to organize several art exhibitions in both countries and led a widely publicized and successful campaign to establish a museum of Korean art in Seoul. The opening ceremonies for the Korean Art Museum (Chōsen min-zoku bijutsukan), as it was rather daringly named, were held in April 1924.<sup>2</sup>

After 1924, Yanagi's focus shifted to the arts and crafts of his native Japan. Only two years later, he was at the center of a small group who declared themselves the champions of a category of objects they would name "mingei" (folk-craft).<sup>3</sup> Their April 1926 manifesto, a pamphlet titled "Prospectus for the Establishment of a Mingei Art Museum," is often taken to mark the



1. The Chosŏn-period jar presented to Yanagi by Asakawa Noritaka in 1914. It is often suggested that Yanagi's interest in Yi dynasty wares dates from his encounter with this object. Courtesy of Nihon Mingeikan.

establishment of the so-called *mingei* movement (*mingei undō*), a loose assemblage of artists, craftspeople, collectors, and others generally thought to have concerned themselves with the discovery and promotion of a rustic, artisanal, and, above all, Japanese aesthetic.

Yet even today, the Korean objects admired so extravagantly by the youthful Yanagi remain embedded within *mingei* ideology and practice. It has become a truism among chroniclers of the movement that Yanagi was led to discover *mingei* as a result of his enthusiasm for Korean arts and crafts. In a sense, the origins of *mingei* are acknowledged to be Korean. Moreover, the specific Chosŏn-period Korean objects Yanagi praised and collected continue to help define the *mingei* aesthetic. One room of the Japan Folk-Crafts Museum (Nihon Mingeikan) in Tokyo, established in 1936 under Yanagi's

direction, remains permanently dedicated to their display. For sale in the museum shop, as in all museum shops, are picture postcards of exemplary objects from the collection; almost always available are several reproductions of especially well-known Korean items. The curators of the museum actively maintain their status as experts on what is known in Japan as “Ri chō,” or Yi dynasty.<sup>4</sup> For example, two glossy paperback guides to the collection and appreciation of Yi dynasty crafts were published in 1998; one was produced under the guidance of members of the museum’s curatorial staff, who also contributed essays to both volumes.<sup>5</sup>

Korea also remains central to Yanagi’s postwar status as a public intellectual. The reverence in which Yanagi’s life and work are held by many both within and beyond mingei circles owes no small part to the reputation he gained posthumously, during the 1960s and 1970s, as a heroic defender of Korean art and culture against the once imperialist Japanese state. This reading of Yanagi’s activism on behalf of Korean art was given influential expression by the well-known cultural critic Tsurumi Shunsuke, for whom Yanagi represented a rare instance of “gentle stubbornness” (*odayaka na gankosa*) in his resistance to wartime ideological mobilization. According to Tsurumi, Yanagi’s attachment to Korean art, and his gently stubborn acknowledgment of a separate and honorable Korean cultural identity, were key demonstrations of his unwavering opposition to the imperialist militarism of the wartime Japanese state.<sup>6</sup> Even the Japanese Ministry of Education may be said to have promoted Yanagi’s postwar identity as an advocate for Korean culture against Japanese colonial rule; a 1974 high school Japanese (*kokugo*) textbook approved by the Ministry included the text of an emotional essay written by Yanagi in 1922 protesting the projected destruction of a historic Seoul landmark by the colonial government.<sup>7</sup>

The postwar characterization of Yanagi as anticolonialist hero of Korean art has not gone unchallenged. During the mid-1970s, in particular, the publication of a Korean translation of Yanagi’s 1922 book *Korea and Her Art* (*Chōsen to sono geijutsu*) was the occasion for a spate of critical writings in Korea on what the poet Ch’oe Harim, who wrote an essay for the translation, called Yanagi’s “aesthetics of colonialism.”<sup>8</sup> In the 1980s and especially in the 1990s, a number of Japanese scholars followed the Korean lead by developing further the arguments that Yanagi’s approach to Korea and Korean art was flawed or somehow implicated in Japanese imperialism.<sup>9</sup> Yet for the most part these discussions stopped short of any consideration of how the colonialist or anticolonialist nature of Yanagi’s Korean activities might be

related to the formation of *mingei* ideal and practice. Despite the close association—sometimes bordering on conflation—of Yanagi's life with the history of *mingei* activism, and despite the continuing importance within the folk-craft aesthetic of his Korean discoveries, the question of *mingei*'s connection to Japanese colonialism in Korea or elsewhere has been little explored.<sup>10</sup>

By considering Yanagi's role in the emergence of Korean art, and especially in the emergence of the genre of Yi dynasty wares, it is possible to see that the categories of both Korean art and *mingei* were partly produced by Japanese colonial power in Korea. Yet the larger, if more diffuse workings of Western imperialism in Asia were also formative. During the Taishō era (1912–1926), Yanagi was only one among a number of cosmopolitan Japanese who partly turned away from Western high culture to celebrate the artistic and spiritual traditions ascribed to the “Orient” (*Tōyō*), a geocultural entity usually identified as comprising China, Japan, Korea, and India. The “return to the Orient” (*Tōyō e no kaiki*), as later scholars have referred to this fascination with the idea of an ancient Oriental civilization, represented a complex adaptation of Western ideas about the non-West. Yanagi and others accepted and employed Western systems of knowledge, including those mechanisms that, like the very idea of an Orient, implied Western superiority. At the same time, however, they sought to refute Western dominance by asserting indigenous Oriental value, and Japanese autonomy in particular.

The significance of the early-twentieth-century Japanese enthusiasm for Korean, Japanese, and other Asian objects must also be understood, therefore, within the context of a world increasingly dominated and defined by Western power. The discovery of Korean art, like the discovery of *mingei*, represented an effort to resist the controlling hierarchies and categories of Western knowledge. Yet the meanings and value that Yanagi and his cohort of collectors successfully attached to Korean objects were also instrumental in the reproduction of Japanese colonial power. The Korean art museum founded by Yanagi and his friends, for example, served ultimately to promote the legitimation and therefore the stability of the Japanese regime in Korea. More generally, the writings of Yanagi and his fellow enthusiasts of Korean art contributed to a larger body of colonial knowledge about Korea and Koreans. They praised Yi dynasty wares and the culture and people that produced them in terms that made Korea's status as a colonial possession of Japan seem both natural and inevitable.

### *Canon Revision and the Uses of Colonialism*

Yanagi was certainly among the most prominent and active of those who took up Yi dynasty, or previously overlooked categories of Chosŏn-period Korean objects, during the early twentieth century. He was by no means alone, however. In addition to Japanese residents of Korea such as Asakawa Noritaka and his younger brother, Takumi, who helped to tutor Yanagi in the appreciation of Chosŏn ceramics, woodwork, and other wares, there were others based in Japan who, like Yanagi, were struck by the new aesthetic possibilities to be found in relatively humble objects of Korean provenance. An alternative narrative of Yanagi's discovery of Korean art, for example, suggests that he was introduced to it by his friends Bernard Leach and Tomimoto Kenkichi, artists who had both become ardent admirers of Chosŏn ceramics after viewing some examples at a colonial exposition in Tokyo in 1912.<sup>11</sup>

The young men who began to congregate in Seoul and Tokyo around their shared enthusiasm for later Chosŏn-period porcelain and stoneware were also linked by similar social and cultural station. As middle-class intellectuals—artists, writers, university students, teachers—they shared a somewhat precarious position as members of a cultural elite largely cut off from the monopoly capital that was rapidly producing a new haute bourgeoisie of industrialists and financiers.<sup>12</sup> Yet the opportunities opened up in Korea by Japanese colonial power gave Yanagi and his peers the means to contest the increasing sway of bourgeois economic elites in the cultural field, especially in the highly prestigious domain of art ceramics. By challenging the authority of the tea ceremony establishment in particular, Yanagi and other middle-class literati were able to revise the art ceramics canon in Japan to include the objects they had discovered in Korea. Through their success in promoting novel categories of Korean ceramics, they gained the cultural capital—or the status and authority—that enabled their campaign to promote *mingei*.

Korean ceramics have been highly valued in Japan for centuries. Certain types of Korean bowls produced during the Koryŏ (918–1392) and early Chosŏn periods, in particular, achieved iconic status during the late sixteenth century in the context of the elite practice of the tea ceremony. Over time there were vagaries in the popularity and status of Korean bowls relative to other, usually Chinese or Japanese teabowls. Nevertheless, the old tea maxim “First Ido [the most important category of Korean teabowl]; second

Raku; third Karatsu,” which ranks Korean bowls above the two most famous types of Japanese teabowl, suggests the extent to which Korean ceramics achieved a preeminent position in one of the most influential aesthetic institutions of early modern and modern Japan.<sup>13</sup>

The importance of Korean bowls, many of them produced during the Chosŏn period, only increased during the early decades of the twentieth century, with the revitalization of the tea ceremony as a pastime for the very rich.<sup>14</sup> It may not seem surprising, therefore, that Japanese aesthetes and collectors of the early twentieth century were disposed to take an interest in the Korean ceramics rendered increasingly accessible by Japanese colonization. Indeed Yanagi himself often cited the aesthetic tradition of tea in explaining the importance he attached to Korean craft objects. He frequently expressed reverence for the creativity and sophistication demonstrated by the early tea masters who, in the early sixteenth century, first recognized the beauty of ordinary Korean rice bowls. Yanagi believed that the tea masters had thereby helped to form a special Japanese aesthetic in which his own discovery of Korean and, later, Japanese and other crafts shared.<sup>15</sup> He proposed that the regard in which he and other Japanese held the pottery and other arts of the Chosŏn period in Korea was an organic development of the Japanese aesthetic tradition and directly linked to the genius of Sen Rikyū, the most famous of the sixteenth-century tea masters.

Yet the enthusiasm of Yanagi and others for Yi dynasty ceramics, not to mention woodwork and other handicrafts, cannot be explained by the tea aesthetic alone. For one thing, the types of pottery and porcelain they helped to bring into vogue among Japanese dealers and collectors during the 1920s and 1930s were quite distinct from the older Korean bowls admitted within the tea canon. Many of the objects that would later come to epitomize Yi dynasty, such as white porcelain (*hakuji*) vases and other objects associated with Confucian ritual practices in Korea, or the small, whimsically shaped “water droppers” (*suíteki*) customarily used by Korean literati to wet their ink stones, had no function in the tea ceremony. Moreover, there was a difference between the way objects—Korean or other—were understood in the tea ceremony and the way they were approached by young Japanese collectors in colonial Korea. By the nineteenth century, the tea ceremony had become a site at which individual objects were appreciated as utterly particular and unique; to participate in the culture of tea was, in part, to accept a highly elaborated, semiapocryphal system of knowledge about a limited number of teabowls and other items. A cherished tea implement (*cha dōgu*), housed like



2. A Chosŏn-period “water dropper” (*suiteki*).  
Courtesy of Nihon Mingaikan.

a jewel in layers of custom-made silk bags and inscribed boxes, was surrounded by an aura of iconic originality. Its value was produced largely by esoteric convention, which assigned it a name, a category, and a pedigree of origin, past ownership, and use.

By contrast, the middle-class intellectuals who browsed the antique shops and markets of colonial Seoul drew on a much more cosmopolitan, self-consciously modern fund of knowledge to evaluate objects. They used universalist standards associated with Western art and science to resist the parochial conventions of the tea world and to assert their own aesthetic authority. Yet at the same time they continued to rely on certain aspects of tea tradition to obtain legitimacy for their efforts to expand the field of collectible objects. Yanagi, for example, claimed that in promoting Yi dynasty ceramics (and, later, certain categories of Chinese, Southeast Asian, rural Japanese, and even English handicraft goods), he was reviving the true spirit of the early tea masters. Later followers of the first geniuses of tea, Yanagi charged, had fallen into an increasingly stylized and imitative formalism. He felt that the tea ceremony as practiced in his own day had lost most of its



originally creative character; it venerated the individual objects hallowed by centuries of tradition but failed to recognize the value that also existed in newer or otherwise unfamiliar things.<sup>16</sup>

Yanagi's characterization of the tea ceremony as an ossified, conservative set of persons and practices was not entirely fair. In fact, during the decades around 1900 the tea ceremony saw one of the more exuberant periods of change and creativity in its long history. Beginning in the 1880s and 1890s, tea was transformed from what had become a genteel, mostly private pastime for literary men into a highly competitive arena for the expression of power, status, and wealth by a variety of rising social groups.<sup>17</sup> Most conspicuously, during the economic boom associated with World War I, a new class of industrialists, particularly those connected with the Mitsui *zaibatsu*, or financial conglomerate, used their wealth to dominate the tea world with a lavish new style of tea that centered on the uninhibited acquisition and display of art objects new to the tea context.<sup>18</sup> Kumakura Isao, in his history of modern tea, argues that the new "zaibatsu tea" of late Meiji and Taishō manifested the capitalistic outlook of successful entrepreneurs reveling in their liberation from an earlier, Confucian suspicion of commerce and money. As a result, the style of tea promoted by these men was characterized by a hedonistic materialism. Spiritual or religious elements the tea ceremony had once incorporated were downplayed in favor of a frankly worldly concern with fabulously expensive tea implements, other art objects for display at tea gatherings, and the opportunities these provided for the negotiation of social status and power.<sup>19</sup>

In some ways *zaibatsu* tea brought a freer approach to tea practice and ideology in the early twentieth century. Its exponents brushed aside received conventions about the type of art suitable for display in order to introduce new categories of objects—namely, those of Buddhist art unconnected to the Zen sects or to tea practice—into the tearoom for the first time.<sup>20</sup> Yet at the same time *zaibatsu* tea reiterated and reinforced selected elements of the tea tradition, particularly as it concerned the canon of famous tea objects (*meiki* or *meibutsu*). The 1920s saw the publication of the *Taishō meiki kan*, an influential nine-volume photographic catalogue of pedigreed tea caddies and tea-bowls.<sup>21</sup> Its compiler, Takahashi Yoshio, a central figure in *zaibatsu* tea circles, intended the catalogue to provide a definitive modern accounting of objects belonging to the category of "celebrated tea implement." Yet with the *Taishō meiki kan* Takahashi actually managed to modify the existing canon even as he reestablished and buttressed its parameters.<sup>22</sup> In so doing, he

reinscribed a hierarchical ranking of ceramics from the perspective of a tea establishment newly invigorated by the infusion of monopoly capital.

Yanagi's critical attitude toward the modern tea ceremony may have had as much to do with the changing nature of the tea world as with its alleged inertia. Nor was he alone in such criticism. The luxurious hedonism that zaibatsu tea represented came to seem increasingly irresponsible and extravagant as the interwar Japanese economy slumped and social issues concerning the urban and rural poor acquired new urgency.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, the growing cachet of the tea ceremony as a form of conspicuous consumption drove the tea goods market to unprecedented heights, richly rewarding the captains of industry who already owned most of the "celebrated tea implements," but probably disgruntling aesthetes with more limited incomes. As Yanagi wrote in 1928, "Today such things as the making of tearooms with great refinement, at the cost of a thousand yen, must be called contrary to the true spirit of tea."<sup>24</sup>

For men such as Yanagi, colonial Korea offered special opportunities to counter the hegemony, reinforced by big money, of the tea tradition over the production and consumption of art ceramics in Japan. Perhaps the first to exploit these opportunities was Asakawa Noritaka, later known in Japan as the "patron saint of Korean pottery" (*Chōsen tōki no kamisama*). As noted earlier, it was Asakawa who is said to have first introduced Yanagi to Chosŏn-period ceramics. In 1913, three years after Japan's formal annexation of Korea, Asakawa moved to Seoul from his native Yamanashi prefecture, where he descended from a line of literary gentry, to take a position as an elementary school teacher. An aspiring sculptor and a tea aficionado himself, Asakawa was frustrated by his inability to afford the types of Korean ceramics favored by most Japanese collectors. Aside from the individual bowls hallowed by tea tradition, the Korean pots admired in Japan, as elsewhere, tended toward the impressive Chinese-style wares produced for ruling elites before the Chosŏn period. Writing much later of the magnificent pieces of old "celadon" he first admired in the Yi Royal Household Museum in Seoul, Asakawa described his frustration as it led to the discovery of a more accessible category of objects: "At that time I was only too sad. I wanted just one good piece, but they were too expensive for me. One night, passing in front of a *Keijō dōguya* [antique or tea implement store], I saw among the jumble of objects a white pot gleaming in the light of the street-lamp. I was drawn to this gently rounded thing, and stood looking at it for some time. This experience is even now stained deeply in my heart."<sup>25</sup>



3. A Chosŏn-period liquor bottle (*tokkuri*), illustrated in the January 1932 issue of *Kōgei*. Yanagi wrote of the bottle, then in the collection of the Korean Art Museum, “The artisan was free. He was not limited by the intention of painting a beautiful design. He did not have consciousness of such things as ‘this design is beautiful.’ ” From *Kōgei* 13 (January 1932): 22.

Asakawa identifies this moment as the point from which his career as an expert on Korean pottery began. (He quit his teaching job in 1919.) The pot was an example of a type of Chosŏn porcelain, distinguished by its milky whiteness, that later became especially popular in Japan.

Yi dynasty white porcelain, along with other types of Korean ceramics from the later Chosŏn period, was relatively cheap and plentiful. Asakawa and other Japanese with more taste and information than money—salaried employees of the colonial government or of private Japanese enterprise in Korea, scholars and writers, students, artists—took it up in part because they could afford it. Akaboshi Gorō, another authority on Yi dynasty, later wrote of his early days antique hunting in colonial Seoul (or Keijō, as it was called by Japanese) that he, like Asakawa, had at first been attracted to so-called celadon porcelain from the Koryŏ period but had been unable to pay the steep prices it commanded on the market:

At that time it was Asakawa Noritaka who opened my eyes to the overlooked Yi dynasty things. I jumped at the opportunity to have him take me around to all the Keijō antique shops. What now seem astonishingly good pieces were lying around all over the place. Most of what I now own I obtained in Keijō. . . . In those days there were lots of [Japanese] antique dealers in Keijō. . . . In addition there were a great many Korean antique dealers, who mostly had junk shops and sideline businesses. I would be in front of a shop, and a *yobo* (a laborer) would come carrying a Buddha or a bronze piece or a pot wrapped in a cloth, and then he and the shop owner would begin to bargain. Finally the *yobo* would leave, and then the piece just bought would be priced at a hundred times the amount paid. Until I got used to it, I found this kind of thing truly unpleasant, but because it was clear that the objects would end up being sold somewhere, I had to buy them.<sup>26</sup>

Akaboshi offers here a glimpse into the colonial market relations that made it possible for him and other Japanese of relatively limited means to amass, despite the occasional pang of conscience, what later became extremely valuable collections of Korean art. Even at prices that returned large profits to Japanese (and some Korean) dealers, Japanese collectors found Korean art objects a good bargain.<sup>27</sup>

In addition to collecting ceramics, Asakawa devoted much of his twenty-odd years in Korea to the investigation of hundreds of old kiln sites in an effort to correct the errors of Japanese tea lore about Korean teabowls. His

challenge to the hegemonic ideology of ceramics purveyed largely by the tea establishment was not confined to the assertion of independent aesthetic authority that Yanagi appeared to find sufficient. Yanagi, already famous due to his close association with the influential *Shirakaba* (White Birch) art and literary magazine (published 1911–1923), through which he helped to introduce canonical elements of Western high culture to Japan, simply dismissed later developments in tea as formalist decadence. He suggested that his own preferences in art ceramics, like the genius of the early tea masters, drew on what he construed as a universal realm of aesthetic value to which he, as a recognized expert on Western art, had special access. Asakawa, a provincial schoolmaster, was perhaps less comfortable snubbing the aesthetic conventions of the rich and venerable. Instead, he bolstered his attack on tea knowledge with science. In 1934 Asakawa gave an address in Tokyo on the subject of his pottery investigations:

Even when the [ceramic] objects that came [to Japan from Korea] in long ago times have written explanations attached to them, these are the judgements made from four-and-a-half mat tearooms by tea people. Because they did not actually know Korea, these judgements are nothing more than flights of fancy. They knew almost none of the facts. . . . If, first, [an object's] place of origin, the period when it was produced, and the conditions of its transmission become clear, then for the first time it will become a proper historical source. For example, when we talk of the Korean teabowl categories of Ido, Totoya, Soba, Katade, Gohon, these are all conventions derived from superficial observation; what is referred to as correct knowledge about these categories consists of the records made regarding individual bowls, and these are nothing more than conventions limited to the tea world. . . . In these days, which are liberated historically and geographically, I think that it is our job to investigate such things on the basis of a correct foundation.<sup>28</sup>

In this lecture Asakawa noted the special advantages of his time and place in colonial Korea. Although he expressed some irritation with the suspicion and passive resistance he encountered from Koreans during his excavating expeditions, he stated, “Ever since the annexation, everything [in Korea] has come to light, and things which were buried unused in the ground have appeared here and there; from the standpoint of research, this is the best of times.”<sup>29</sup>

Asakawa's findings appear to have troubled the tea establishment. Takahashi Yoshio, when compiling the three volumes dealing with Korean tea-bowls in the nine-volume *Taishō meiki kan*, felt himself compelled to make repeated references to Asakawa's investigations in Korea and the new critical light in which they cast many of the received traditions of the tea world.<sup>30</sup> Takahashi resolved his dilemma by regretting that it was too late for him to fully assimilate Asakawa's contributions in the *Taishō meiki kan*: "Because I myself wish to go to Korea after the publication of this catalogue is completed, and do research there, for the time being I will base my commentary here on the past sayings of tea people, and hope to elucidate with regard to new facts such as those cited above at some other time."<sup>31</sup> However that elucidation may have been managed, the authority of tea ideology was gradually forced to retreat, in the face of empirical contradiction, from its original monopoly on the truth of Korean-Japanese pottery.

In their resistance to the authority of tea, and in their efforts to draw attention in Japan to previously overlooked categories of art ceramics, Yanagi and Asakawa joined a more general trend in ceramics appreciation. Scholarly groups like the *Tōjiki kenkyūkai* and the *Saikōkai*, whose leading members were attached to Tokyo Imperial University, and the *Chōsōkai* at Waseda University dedicated themselves to the scientific study and appreciation of old Japanese, Chinese, and other Asian ceramics. Their efforts were partly inspired by the example—and threat—of European and American scholars and collectors, whose access to certain types of Japanese and other Asian art treasures had only been facilitated by the narrow scope of tea taste.<sup>32</sup> At the same time they, like Yanagi and Asakawa, were often collectors of relatively limited means who sought to broaden the field of art ceramics eligible for legitimate appreciation.

But Asakawa, Akaboshi, Yanagi, and the other early collectors of Yi dynasty pottery and porcelain also used the advantages of their position in colonial Korea, in combination with the tools of Western-style knowledge, to force open the categories of collectible art in Japan. They became cultural heroes of a sort for establishing a distinct subfield in the appreciation of ceramics that was both independent of tea taste and yet partly informed and legitimated by it. As a measure of their success, Japanese demand for Yi dynasty grew rapidly during the early twentieth century, spreading from colonial residents and visiting cognoscenti in Korea to the metropolitan market in Japan. So popular did several types of the Chosŏn-period pottery and porcelain first collected by Yanagi and his peers become that there also

emerged a lively trade in Yi dynasty fakes, known sometimes as “Taishō Rīchō” (Taishō Yi dynasty).<sup>33</sup>

In successfully revising the canon of Japanese art ceramics, intellectuals and artists like Yanagi and Asakawa were able to wrest some of the leadership in the prestigious field of art ceramics from bourgeois economic elites, who were bidding for dominance from their new power position within the tea establishment. Colonial opportunities allowed middle-class literati to parlay modest investments into enormous returns in cultural capital. Although the highest prices continued to go to the older, rarer, and safely pedigreed objects of tea, the market value and cultural prestige of the late Chosŏn-period objects first bought cheaply in colonial Seoul climbed steadily, bringing both symbolic and actual wealth to many of its early collectors.<sup>34</sup>

### *Solving the Korea Problem*

The success of Yanagi, Asakawa, and others in revising the Japanese art canon to include novel categories of Korean objects owed much to the immediate and material opportunities opened up in colonial Korea to Japanese of even modest wealth. Especially after formal annexation in 1910, it was a relatively simple matter for Japanese like the Asakawa brothers and Yanagi to live, work, and travel in Korea, usually with the sorts of privileges monopolized by colonial elites everywhere. For Japanese in Korea, these included the freedom to seek out and appropriate Korean goods of all description at very low cost, and also to remove those goods—even rare or antique art objects—permanently to Japan.

But colonial power also produced other, less predictable opportunities for Japanese interested in shaping new meanings or identities. Yanagi and his immediate circle were especially active between 1919 and 1924, when Korean nationalist resistance opened up new spaces for negotiation and change within the colonial context. They used the relative fluidity and even instability of this period, when Japanese colonial policy and administration were under public review, to promote their own programs for cultural reform. By boldly engaging in the debate on colonial policy, Yanagi gained unprecedented publicity for his own definitions of art generally, and of Korean art in particular. He also succeeded in gaining significant public support in both countries for his various projects to improve Japan-Korea relations through the cultural “preservation” and “revival” of Korea. There was a critical edge to culturalist reform efforts like Yanagi’s, which implicitly

or explicitly suggested the inadequacy and immorality of assimilationist colonial policy. Yet it is important to recognize that in Korea during the early 1920s, nationalist cultural reform was a means employed by governing authorities to produce legitimacy and stability for the Japanese regime. Korean art proved very useful to the colonial system that helped to define it.

Early 1920s Korea was the site for a widely acknowledged crisis in colonial relations. By 1919, a decade of oppressive, even brutal assimilationist rule had produced an uncontrollable level of outrage and opposition throughout much of Korean society. The organized mass demonstrations that ensued on 1 March 1919, thereafter sacred to Korean nationalist memory as the March first movement (*samil undong*), terrified and infuriated colonial authorities, who called out the troops. Several weeks of mayhem and some thousands of Korean casualties later, it was clear to many in Japan as well as Korea that something had gone very wrong. Although mainstream Japanese opinion tended to blame Koreans, and also Western missionaries, for what were commonly described as “riots” and “insubordination” by “malcontent Koreans” (*futei na Senjin*), it was difficult to escape the reflection that Japanese colonial policy might also bear some responsibility. As a consequence, the “Korea problem” (*Chōsen mondai*) and discussion of its resolution figured large in both colonial and metropolitan publications for several years thereafter.

In this context, Yanagi was one of the few Japanese who dared to publish, repeatedly, opinion sharply critical of Japanese colonial policy. In essays and articles that appeared in newspapers and well-known journals from 1919 through 1924, he presented himself as a conscientious objector to the inhumanity and philistinism characterizing Japanese attitudes and policy toward Korea. As he put it in “Thinking about Koreans” (“*Chōsenjin o omou*”), an impassioned four-part article published first in a major Tokyo daily in May 1919, “If we wish for eternal peace between ourselves and our neighbors, then we must purify and warm our hearts with love and sympathy. But, unfortunately, Japan has dealt with the sword, and offered abuse. Can this possibly give rise to mutual understanding, or create cooperation, or produce union? Nay, all Koreans feel throughout their beings a limitless enmity, resistance, hatred, and separation [*bunri*]. It is an inevitable consequence that independence should be their ideal.” Yanagi especially stressed the efficacy of art as a means of producing the mutual understanding and love necessary for improved Japanese-Korean relations: “I believe it is art, not science, that promotes congress between countries, and draws peoples to-