

# Yanagi Sōetsu's Vision of an Ideal Society: With Reference to His Views on Nationalism, Anarchism, and Guild Socialism

Mari NAKAMI\*

## Abstract

Yanagi Sōetsu (aka. Yanagi Muneyoshi, 1889-1961) is generally seen as the founder of the *mingei* (folk crafts) movement, and is also known for his involvement in the “Korean question” when Korea was under Japanese colonial rule. In fact, his lifework was far more varied and wide-ranging. This essay discusses Yanagi’s vision of an ideal society by examining his views on nationalism, anarchism, and guild socialism in order to characterize his essential philosophy. Despite living at a time when imperial Japan was imposing a policy of cultural assimilation upon its colonies and occupied territories, during the pre-war period Yanagi envisioned the realization of a culturally pluralistic society in which peoples and regions would each be free to enjoy their own cultures. Although he celebrated Japan’s own cultural individuality, he also valued the cultural distinctiveness of other peoples, both within and outside the Japanese Empire, and he resisted the policy of cultural assimilation through non-violent means. Yanagi was a rare and remarkable Japanese intellectual who managed to escape the mindset which Maruyama Masao has termed “oppression transfer,” whereby the Japanese sought to transfer to other parts of Asia the oppression which the modern West had inflicted upon Japan.

## Keywords

cultural individuality, nonviolence, enjoyment of cultural rights, composite beauty, mutual aid, free from “oppression transfer” mindset

---

\* Mari Nakami (mari-nkm@wf6.so-net.ne.jp) is Professor of Cultural History at Seisen University.

## Introduction

Yanagi Sōetsu (柳宗悦, aka. Yanagi Muneyoshi, 1889-1961) is generally seen as the founding father of the *mingei* (民芸, folk crafts) movement, though in Korea he is mostly still associated with his “beauty of sorrow” discourse. Since the 1990s he has been the subject of what has been described by Kurata Takashi as “a great chorus of criticism.”<sup>1</sup> With the growing popularity of post-colonial studies and cultural studies, a viewpoint has been gaining strength that seeks to expose “colonial violence” lurking in seemingly innocuous words and deeds, for which Yanagi has become an ideal target. But Yanagi was not involved only in *mingei* and the “Korean question”: actually he engaged in a far broader sphere of activities.<sup>2</sup> In fact, the essence of his concerns can only be grasped by taking into account the totality of his thought and his conduct.

Yanagi understood the importance of Japan’s cultural individuality, but he was also one of the few pre-war Japanese thinkers who valued the cultural distinctiveness of other peoples, both within and beyond imperial Japan. Thus he resisted, by nonviolent means, the prevailing policy of cultural assimilation — *i.e.* imposing Japanese customs, culture, etc., on other peoples — that was being implemented by the political authorities.

Almost all of the intellectuals contemporary with Yanagi who sought to promote Japanese culture saw it as having unique and absolute importance, and were complicit in the policy of cultural assimilation directed at other peoples. They regarded it as only natural that Japan should dominate Asia; they supported Japan’s military aggression in the region, and also the idea of the Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere. They were quite unable to regard the other peoples of Asia as deserving to be respected on a par with the Japanese people.

Along with his compatriots, Yanagi also took pride in his Japanese culture, but he did not lapse into exclusionary ethnocentrism. Where others were inclined towards suppressing the cultures of the other peoples of Asia, Yanagi held in high regard the cultures on the periphery of imperial Japan: Korea, Okinawa, the Ainu, and Taiwan. He was one of the first thinkers in modern Japan to realize how important it was for the politically

---

<sup>1</sup> See Kurata (2012), p.124.

<sup>2</sup> On the breadth of Yanagi’s activities, see Nakami (2003), pp.3-4; (2011), pp.xxiii-xxiv; (2013), p.ii.

and economically “weak” to have the right to enjoy their own culture.

Moreover, Yanagi did not reject modern Western civilization. For his time, he was unusual in not feeling any inferiority complex about Europe and America, and by and large he succeeded in promoting Japanese culture in a form that was accessible to the outside world. This allowed him to escape the mindset which Maruyama Masao (丸山真男) has termed “oppression transfer” (*yokuatsu ijō*, 抑圧移譲), whereby the Japanese sought to transfer to other parts of Asia the oppression which the modern West had inflicted upon Japan.

In this essay I will establish the character of Yanagi’s thinking by investigating the ideal society which he envisioned, through examining his views on nationalism, anarchism, and guild socialism.

## Yanagi’s Views on Nationalism

First, I wish to draw attention to the clear evidence of Yanagi’s support for Japanese nationalism; but his nationalism was intended to promote cultural identity, and it remained cultural in character. So how did his view of nationalism evolve?<sup>3</sup>

Like the majority of Japanese intellectuals at the time, Yanagi was absorbed by the question of how the East and Japan could establish their own independent significance and standing when the modern West — being overwhelmingly dominant in the realms of politics, the economy, and culture — was sweeping across the world. When he started to become active in the Shirakaba (白樺, White Birch) school, around 1910, Yanagi felt a strong inferiority complex towards the West and avidly pursued its very latest ideas. However, he also thought that the East and Japan should not merely imitate the West, but should make their own cultural contributions, so he began to put his energy also into exploring aspects of his own culture that could be presented to the West with pride.

Thus, Yanagi discerned the characteristics of the Western spirit, which emphasizes science and reason, and of the Eastern spirit, which highlights imagination and intuition, before turning his attention to religion and art as areas in which the East excelled. Yanagi began to concentrate on

---

<sup>3</sup> For this process, see Nakami (2003), pp.86-94; pp.106-11; (2011), pp.73-80; (2013), pp.56-61.

exploring what was distinctively Eastern, rather than pursuing the latest trends imported from the West. He had high hopes for art in particular, especially after being dazzled by the magnificence of a 1914 exhibition of works by Honami Kōetsu (本阿弥光悦), Ogata Kenzan (尾形乾山), Ogata Kōrin (尾形光琳), Sesshū (雪舟), and Itō Jakuchū (伊藤若冲). When studying the Post-Impressionists (van Gogh, Cézanne, etc.) he discovered that some artists in the West felt that art had lost its vitality through the excesses of modernity, and so were trying to learn from non-Western pre-modern art: this encouraged Yanagi to believe that Japanese art could make a valuable contribution to enhancing Japan's stature in the world.

But then Yanagi was confronted by an unexpected problem: he made the troubling discovery that the greatest art in Japan, the Japanese national treasures, were actually the work of Chinese or Korean artists, or were mere imitations of such works. As a result he was again troubled by an identity crisis about Japanese culture, since even if Japanese art could contribute to the modern West, Japan was peripheral to the Chinese cultural sphere, with a doubtful claim to any truly Japanese originality. Yanagi therefore became determined to search for a specifically Japanese form of beauty which Japan could be proud of even in the context of Chinese and Korean art.

In differentiating the aesthetics of beauty for China, Korea, and Japan, Yanagi employed two strands of thought. First, that the culture of a people will inevitably be interwoven with their natural environment and history, and second, that the spirit of a people will be most clearly expressed in the artefacts used by the common people in their everyday lives.

From the first strand Yanagi developed a view of ethnic culture that understood it organically as a form of "life"; while through the second he recognized the "beauty of health" in the everyday implements used by ordinary people, which led to his exposition of "mingei." In particular, he found in the mingei of the Tokugawa (徳川) period something worth boasting about, which he became convinced would allow Japan demonstrate its individuality to the world. At the same time, he also understood that a faith rooted in the everyday lives of nameless ordinary artisans was revealed in the innocence and outstanding beauty of the handicrafts they had produced. (For Yanagi, this represented the synthesis of faith and beauty; he had originally been a philosopher of religion.) According to Yanagi, such mingei were neither imitations nor emulations, and compared favorably with the products of "great China" and "elegant Korea." Yanagi

gained confidence through this discovery, and from 1926 he pushed forward with the mingei movement, seeking to assert the presence of Japan on the world stage through the realization and expression of an ideal of beauty in harmony with faith.

Thus Yanagi embraced a view of cultural nationalism which was centered on beauty. But with its emphasis on the individuality of Japanese culture, this form of nationalism is liable to lead to the exclusion of and discrimination against anything different. The dangerous next step is to combine such views with political nationalism, and also the sense that one's own culture is superior, resulting ultimately in the forced imposition of Japanese culture.

In practice, however, Yanagi's nationalism was relativized by local culture, which reflected the distinctive features of each region. After recognizing the importance of mingei, Yanagi began to value local handicrafts which had been created prior to the tide of modernization and were therefore unsullied by commercialism. This also meant respecting the indigenous culture of the common people: valuing the locally available materials which they utilized, and their local manners and customs.

Since modernization brought about the standardization of culture and made it more efficient, many people aspired to adopt such an "advanced" culture. Local cultures were therefore deemed "backward" from this perspective, but for Yanagi these cultures were of the greatest value and constituted the very foundation of Japanese culture. He believed that Japan should take pride in the abundance of mingei, with every rural region producing outstanding handicrafts, from Tōhoku in the north to Okinawa in the south. By contrast, he was dismissive of cities, where many imitations of the modern West could be seen, and Yanagi's "Japan" also excluded the colonies and occupied territories inhabited by other peoples.

Yanagi's nationalism therefore differed from the political nationalism of a nation-state seeking to standardize culture (and which easily becomes ultranationalism and territorial expansionism), and was instead a pluralistic cultural nationalism in which each region exhibited its own cultural characteristics.<sup>4</sup> This difference in orientation is plainly shown by the debate about the Okinawan language that Yanagi initiated around 1940. After the Russo-Japanese War, Japan had followed the model of

---

<sup>4</sup> For Yanagi's views on nationalism (and on Japan), see Nakami (2003), pp.223-30; (2011), pp.206-14. For his views on local culture, see Nakami (2013), pp.154-5; pp.162-3.

homogenizing language policies set by modern European states, and standard Japanese was therefore promoted as the “national language.” Regional “dialects” thus became targets of exclusion and suppression, being seen as premodern and irrational, and as a hindrance to communication among Japan’s citizens. Against this background, Yanagi argued for “the value of Okinawan.” He did not say that a standard form of Japanese was unnecessary, but this point was misunderstood, and he was strongly criticized by contemporary Okinawans who were desperate to improve their social status.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, Yanagi’s version of nationalism was unusual in taking a perspective that differentiated the cultures of the various peoples of Asia rather than lumping them all together: he viewed each ethnic culture, with its distinct character due to differences in its natural environment and history, as organically constituting a single, unified form of “life.” He therefore reached the view that peoples should not violate the “lives” of other peoples.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, even after the outbreak of the second Sino-Japanese War in 1937, when imperial Japan was implementing its policy of cultural assimilation ever more rigorously, Yanagi remained critical of imposing Japanese values on the people of Asia. For example, in 1938 he wrote that “it is meaningless to give guidance in a Japanese manner for things to be done in Korea,” and even in 1941-1942 he was writing that “to lose what is Japanese would be a loss for the world; in the same way, to lose what is Korean or Chinese would also be a loss for the world,” and he also urged respect for “the intrinsic beauty of China” and “the intrinsic cultural values of Korea.”<sup>7</sup> He also praised the Ainu, valuing their ability to create outstanding beauty, and drawing attention their devout beliefs from which this beauty arose. He stated that we (*wajin*, 和人) should learn from the Ainu as “teachers” and “reflect on what we are lacking,” and he also criticised the educational system for “changing the Ainu into present-day Japanese.” As well, he argued that outstanding culture was to be found in Taiwan too: “There are aspects to which we must bow our heads and seek instruction

<sup>5</sup> For Yanagi and the Okinawan language debate, see Nakami (2003), pp.224-6; pp.234-7; (2011), pp.208-10; pp.217-21; (2013), pp.140-50.

<sup>6</sup> See Nakami (2003), p.118; (2011), p.104; (2013), pp.97-9.

<sup>7</sup> For Yanagi’s views on the Ainu and the Aborigines of Taiwan, see Nakami (2003), pp.237- 9; (2011), pp.222-4; (2013), pp.155-62.

[from Taiwan's indigenous peoples]." Yanagi's stance was therefore remarkable for showing respect to and seeking to learn from the cultures of peoples situated on the periphery of imperial Japan.

It is also worth mentioning that in the course of developing the *mingei* movement Yanagi had reached the view that if *mingei*, which he understood as representing the cultural individuality of Japan, embodied the everyday aesthetic of the common people, then such works would undoubtedly be found in every ethnic group. As a result, he became convinced that in every nation the common people must have used local materials to produce everyday artefacts in which function was combined with beauty.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, he sought out striking *mingei* created by other peoples in order to learn from these.

It should also be understood that Yanagi recognized the limitations of science but never denied its merits, and he did not regard modern Western civilization with hostility. Although he attached great importance to the individuality of his own culture, he was also ready to learn from the West. Yanagi took the view that the best way to invigorate one's own culture was to stay grounded in it whilst remaining available to be stimulated by the diversity of influences from outside it.<sup>9</sup>

Thus Yanagi's vision of an ideal society did not advocate an exclusionary attitude towards non-Japanese cultures, but instead celebrated the freedom of different peoples and regions to exhibit their own cultural characteristics. What was the background to his reaching this understanding? An important factor was his encounter with anarchist thought, which will now be explored.

## The Influence of Anarchism upon Yanagi

Throughout his life Yanagi maintained a strong interest in the question of how to reconcile mutually opposed concepts (which was at the time referred to as the "duality question"). In addition to the contrast between East and West, other issues that Yanagi addressed included the contrast between Christianity and Buddhism, between the individual artist and the artisan in

---

<sup>8</sup> See Nakami (2013), p.162.

<sup>9</sup> Nakami (2003), p.35; pp.97-8; (2011), p.23; pp.84-5; (2013), pp.172-3.

the mingei movement, between cities and rural areas, and between machine-made goods and handicrafts.

When seeking answers to these questions, Yanagi was strongly drawn to the idea of mutual aid put forward by P. Kropotkin (1842-1921). After reading *Mutual Aid* and other books by Kropotkin in 1909-10, Yanagi constantly endeavored to apply the principle of mutual aid. Although he never directly discussed Kropotkin, a careful reading of Yanagi's writings reveals many references to the Kropotkin's notion of mutual aid: he had read the English translation of *Mutual Aid* and rendered the term "mutual aid" as *sōgo hojo* (相互補助), which he used instead of the standard Japanese equivalent of *sōgo fujo* (相互扶助).

For example, in the editor's postscript to the inaugural issue of *Shirakaba* in 1910 he wrote that "*mutual aid* is the force that created this magazine" (emphasis here and below by the current author). In 1918, when Mushanokōji Saneatsu (武者小路実篤) set about establishing his New Village (新しき村) commune, Yanagi wrote: "This venture will beautifully unravel the mystery of how one can live among others without sacrificing oneself. The roots of this venture are characterized by its strong cooperation. They are nurturing roots through which all members provide *mutual aid to one another*." Again, in the preface to *Religion and its Truth* (宗教と真理), published in 1919, he wrote: "Would many different flowers blossoming in a field spoil the beauty of the field? *Each of them helps the others* to enhance the beauty of the world by replacing monotonous colour with composite beauty." Yanagi also utilized this way of thinking in the mingei movement, and his interest in mutual aid never waned, even in his final years.<sup>10</sup>

Yanagi's built on this idea of mutual aid through his appreciation of Walt Whitman, who affirmed all things, and William Blake, who discovered "the foundation of the sublime" in minutiae such as "a wild flower" and "a grain of sand." According to Yanagi, Blake found "none of God's creations meaningless or aimless," "praised Hell as well as loving Heaven," and perceived with profound insight that "two harmonious yet contrasting worlds lie hidden in all phenomena." These influences led Yanagi to develop his understanding that all dualities such as high and low, large and small, and strong and weak are reciprocally dependent, so that no

<sup>10</sup> For Yanagi's encounter with and reception of Kropotkin's idea of mutual aid, see Nakami (2003), p.64; pp.67-8; (2011), p.51; pp.54-6; (2013), pp.42-4; pp.51-2.



phenomenon can be perceived in isolation, and it is therefore always necessary to give equal consideration to related phenomena whether they are held in high or low social regard.<sup>11</sup>

In distinct contrast, Japan in this era viewed international relations in terms of a world in which the strong devoured the weak, and was pursuing such Social Darwinist policies by trying to swallow up Asia in emulation of the strong Western powers. Here it is noteworthy that for a while some members of the Shirakaba school and Japan's leading anarchists were quite close in their thinking.<sup>12</sup> Arishima Takeo (有島武郎), who had read Kropotkin's works while he was studying in the United States, visited him in London immediately before his return to Japan in 1907. Both he and Mushanokōji were personally acquainted with the anarchists Ōsugi Sakae (大杉栄) and Ishikawa Sanshirō (石川三四郎). Moreover, the journal *Kindai Shisō* (近代思想, Modern Thought), launched by Ōsugi and Arahata Kanson (荒畑寒村) in 1912, had an exchange arrangement with *Shirakaba*. Around this time Ōsugi remarked that he liked *Shirakaba* best of all among the Japanese literary magazines then in circulation, and he also commented upon the similarities between Kropotkin, a former Russian aristocrat, and some members of the Shirakaba school, many of whom were the sons of aristocrats.

In June 1913 Ōsugi published "The Facts of Subjugation" in *Kindai Shisō*, arguing that literary writers were escaping their responsibility to comment on social issues and were providing mere "amusements." Some authors, such as Mushanokōji and Shiga Naoya (志賀直哉) were clearly shaken by his criticisms. For instance, Mushanokōji, who had previously spoken about remaining locked within his own inner world, wrote an essay entitled "The Execution of 800 People" in response to the Tapani or Xilaian (西来庵) incident, an uprising that occurred in Taiwan in 1915. As far as is known, the only other contemporary Japanese opposition to this incident came from Ōsugi, who in December that year published an essay in *Kindai Shisō*. In "Facts and Interpretation: Rebellions in the Colonies — India, Vietnam, Taiwan, and Korea" he commented on "newspaper reports of the facts of violent uprisings frequently taking place in various colonies in Asia," and he also remarked that "colonies reveal the facts about

<sup>11</sup> See Nakami (2003), p.52; (2011), pp.39-40; (2013), pp.53-5.

<sup>12</sup> See Nakami (2003), pp.61-78; (2011), pp.48-65; (2013), pp.48-50.

subjugation most frankly.”

Even before they had been influenced by Ōsugi, the members of the Shirakaba school shared a viewpoint that relativized the Japanese state by greatly esteeming the cultural activities of Western geniuses and being distinctly unenthusiastic about Japan’s colonialism.<sup>13</sup> For example, Arishima Takeo criticised Japanese moves to make Korea a protectorate, and he was sarcastic of its annexation by Japan. Then in 1911 Mushanokōji wrote, “I think it was no exaggeration at all when [Thomas] Carlyle said something to the effect that he would not mind losing India but not Shakespeare .... In fact, thinking of such a great figure gives me a much clearer sense of strength and courage than knowing that Korea has been made a dependency of Japan.” Later in 1911 Yanagi expressed similar sentiments after taking in his hands three sculptures that Auguste Rodin had sent to the Shirakaba school: “I felt that Taiwan, Sakhalin, and Korea, which Japan acquired by killing tens of thousands of people, were incomparably less significant than these sculptures by Rodin.”

It can reasonably be surmised that some or all of the members of the Shirakaba school had long shared such views, though the influence of Ōsugi later prompted them to become more actively involved with society. Indeed in 1918, Mushanokōji, after writing about the Xilalian incident, took a distinctly practical turn in his social activism by establishing his New Village commune, though Ōsugi expressed disappointment with this undertaking.

There is no evidence that Yanagi came into direct contact with Ōsugi or Ishikawa. But he was on friendly terms with Eto Tekirei (江渡狄嶺, 1880-1944), a thinker who was strongly influenced by the ideas of Tolstoy and Kropotkin, and Eto was acquainted with Ōsugi, and Ishikawa, as well as with Kōtoku Shūsui (幸徳秋水). Yanagi took an interest in the Hyakushōai Dōjō (百性愛道場, Love of Farming School), a collective farm that Eto had opened in 1911, and he was also a frequent visitor to Eto’s home.<sup>14</sup>

There were thus quite a number of people in Yanagi’s circle of acquaintances who sympathized with Kropotkin’s ideas, and therefore Yanagi too may be considered to have been within the sphere of influence of anarchist thought. This is the context of Yanagi’s decision to become

<sup>13</sup> See Nakami (2003), p.102; (2011), p.89; (2013), pp.77-8.

<sup>14</sup> See Nakami (2003), p.78; (2011), p.65; (2013), p.50.

actively involved in resisting Japan's Korea policies in response to the launching of the March 1st Movement for Korean independence, in 1919. Ōsugi had written an essay in April 1918, *Fallacies of Racial Nationalism* (民族主義の虚偽), in which he had drawn attention to "the facts of the subjugation of Taiwan and Korea."

So what sort of concrete action did Yanagi take in connection with Korea?<sup>15</sup> First, he was shocked by Japan's violent suppression of the March 1st Movement, so he wrote an essay, "Thinking of the Koreans," which was published in the newspaper *Yomiuri Shinbun* (読売新聞) on 20-24 May 1919. In this essay Yanagi asked whether Japan, which had sent enormous sums of money, as well as troops and politicians, to Korea, was really behaving in the best interests of the Korean people. He also remarked that the Japanese oppressors were far more foolish than the Koreans resistors, that the Japanese were attempting to implant Japanese ideas in Korea without trying to win over the hearts and minds of the Koreans, and that it was inevitable that they would aspire to achieve independence. Yanagi wanted Koreans to know that there was at least one Japanese person who was reflecting on the inhumane policies of the Japanese government. Later, in "Letter to a Korean Friend," (*Kaizo* 改造, June 1920) he wrote that Korea must not become the slave of Japan, and that if it did, rather than being ignominious for Korea this would actually be the ultimate indignity for Japan; the word "slave" was censored, however, and replaced by asterisks. He also wrote that the Japanese, as imperfect humans, had no authority to assimilate the Koreans and that such a policy was sure to provoke resistance; this entire sentence was deleted by the censors. Yanagi also criticised the Jemri Massacre, part of the crackdown on the March 1st Movement, in "On Bolshevism" (*Kaizo*, Dec. 1920).

Turning to Yanagi's artistic involvement with Korea: in 1922 Yanagi voiced his opposition to plans to demolish the Gwanghwamun (光化門), a Joseon era formal gate to Gyeongbokgung Palace (景福宮) in Seoul. Then in 1924 he gave encouragement to the people of Korea by lending his support to establishing the Korean Folk Art Museum (朝鮮民族美術館) in Gyeongbokgung Palace and by his admiration for the art of the Joseon dynasty. When speaking of Korea, he did not only refer to the "beauty of sorrow" but also used other expressions. For example, he considered the

<sup>15</sup> For Yanagi's activities in Korea and his views on Korea, see Nakami (2003), chap. 6; (2011), chap. 6; (2013), chap. 3.

stone Buddhas at the Seokguram Grotto to compare favourably with any artistic creation anywhere in the world, writing that Korea was a country that had produced “great beauty,” and applying the same term to its people; it was therefore “shallow-minded” to “educate” them. Moreover, he described the Yi dynasty of the Joseon era as “a special period that can truly be called Korean” and characterized the Gwanghwamun and the ceramics of the Yi period as possessing a “beauty of might,” a “beauty of will,” a “beauty of dignity,” a “masculine beauty,” and so on.

In cultural terms, Yanagi regarded each ethnic culture as a single organic life form, and on this basis he respected the subjectivity of the Koreans. He made effective use of this view of ethnic culture to criticize Japan’s policy of cultural assimilation. For example, he noted that the stone Buddha images at the Seokguram Grotto constituted “a single, indivisible organic creation in which all parts enhance one another,” and he criticized the renovation being undertaken by the governor-general’s office (総督府), for destroying Seokguram’s integrity by adding the “ugliness of science” to the “beauty of art,” even though “its value cannot be appreciated if its parts are separated.” He also remarked that he would much prefer for the Koreans to restore the grotto themselves. As for the Gwanghwamun Gate, it was eventually reconstructed at another location, but Yanagi argued that, when deciding on its placement, the Koreans had taken into account the natural balance with hills behind, and he was opposed to any relocation that destroyed this organic relationship.

Yanagi also argued that it would be detrimental for the Japanese to involve themselves in economic activities, higher education, and other “tasks that the Koreans themselves ought to be doing,” and he wrote that it would be desirable, “if at all possible, for a university to be built through funding and planning by the Koreans themselves.” It is likely that Yanagi had already made contact with Koreans about the movement to use Korean products and the push to establish a private Korean university. Similarly, he believed that understanding the beauties of Korea ought to be left to the Koreans themselves: “If there is anyone who can truly portray Korea, that person has to be a Korean.” He continued, “there is something missing in Korea as seen by us mainland Japanese” and “it is a basic principle of the universe that things Korean are best understood by Koreans and should be produced by Koreans.”

Another way that Yanagi spoke up for Koreans arose from his philosophical position concerning the “duality” of the ruler and the ruled.

“Let us suppose that we Japanese were in the present position of the Koreans,” he wrote, asserting that the Japanese would be fomenting riot and insurrection even more vigorously than the Koreans in their exiting situation. He stressed the importance of putting oneself in the position of others: “Before we insist on a Japanese-style education [for Koreans], we should try to imagine that we are Koreans having such an education imposed on us and seriously consider how we would feel.” Similarly, he urged the Japanese to imagine how they would feel if Edo (江戸) Castle in Tokyo were to meet the same fate as had met Gwanghwamun Gate.

In February 1920 Namgung Byeok (南宮璧), a Korean student who had been deeply touched by Yanagi's writings, visited him at his home in Abiko (我孫子). This led to Yanagi developing some closer friendships with Koreans, chiefly some who had studied in Japan, some members of the Korean literary circle Pyeheo (Haikyo, 廢墟, Ruins), and some people associated with the YMCA. Once Koreans began visiting him at home, he is said to have been placed under surveillance by the Special Higher Police. During the 1920s he visited Korea 14 times, which allowed him to directly make contact with and appreciate the concerns of the Koreans, and so to develop his views on Korea. The Koreans whom he met included Yun Chiho (尹致昊), Kim Uyeong (金雨英), Sin Heung-u (申興雨), Chang Deok-soo (張德秀), Yi Sanghyeop (李相協), and Cho Man-sik (曹晩植). Yanagi's writings were also translated into Korean by Yeom Sangseop (廉尚燮), and published in the newspaper for which he reported, *Donga Ilbo* (東亞日報); Yeom later became a famous novelist.

Yanagi stressed that Korea, having become politically and economically “weak,” should work to recover its former strength, of which a few traces remained; Korea's dignity could only be restored by making the maximum use of its inherent cultural resources. He urged Koreans to work to improve their position through the power of their culture, which today might be called soft power, and encouraged the reinvigoration of their ethnic culture. It cannot be denied that, contrary to his stated intentions, his activities were in practice rather redolent of the “cultural rule” of the time, but he was clearly aiming in a very different direction from the governor general's policy of cultural assimilation. Yanagi's ideas evoked a favourable response among intellectuals who took a similar view: that Korea should first nurture its capabilities by developing its cultural power, before seeking independence.

Turning to Yanagi's vision of peace: he was opposed to the use of force

because he had developed his own ideas about the nature of peace.<sup>16</sup> The framework of his views was formed through his encounters with Kropotkin's idea of mutual aid, with Blake's philosophy, and with the absolute pacifism of the Quakers. In this paper, Yanagi's understanding of pacifism is referred to as "composite beauty."

From his emphasis upon mutual aid, Yanagi believed that world peace did not mean painting the world in only one colour. Since East and West had each their own specific and dissimilar natural environments and histories, any effort to turn the East into the West would be futile, and so there was a need for mutual respect and understanding. He argued, therefore, that the East should maintain its cultural distinctness vis-à-vis the West, and at the same time that the different peoples of the East should each be enabled to express their own individual characters within the East. Yanagi thus understood the use of military force by a suzerain state in its colonies as the equivalent of a war between autonomous powers. The majority of pacifists at the time were racking their brains about how to prevent war between the great powers, and many of them accepted without question the use of force within colonies. In effect, they espoused a pseudo-universalist view of peace that privileged the position of the colonial powers, and in this respect Yanagi's view of peace was surely ahead of his time.

It could be said that Yanagi succeeded in internalizing this pacifist philosophy of "composite beauty": he was able to achieve this balance through his contacts with other Korean intellectuals, as well as with the Briton Bernard Leach, later a renowned potter. Yanagi's view of peace was underpinned by his conviction that it was impossible to gain peace of mind without being exposed to a heterogeneous experience of beauty. Thus Yanagi eschewed the prevailing attitude of Social Darwinism, which regarded Japan as a leading country and facilitated its policy of cultural assimilation and aggression towards Asia.

Yanagi also perceived the need to break the chain of violence, which meant opposing the use of force even for the sake of justice, but he did not advocate doing nothing when confronted by injustice. Thus he urged Koreans not to resort to bloodshed, but rather to patiently build up their strength in the cultural sphere. For Yanagi "absolute pacifism" was by no

---

<sup>16</sup> For Yanagi's views on peace, see Nakami (2003), chap. 9; (2011), chap. 9; (2013), chap. 4.

means a passive stance; indeed it represented “unsurpassed activity” and “the most courageous attitude” conceivable. Yanagi later came to sympathize with Gandhi’s ideas on nonviolent resistance, and his actions in Korea display the use of concrete tactics based on nonviolence.

Although Yanagi was sympathetic towards anarchism, it should be understood that he was consistently opposed to authoritarian and centralized communism: his ideal was a decentralized society of free association based on mutual aid along the lines advocated by Kropotkin. He also criticized communism for its absolute and self-centered confidence in the correctness of its own viewpoint which makes it intolerant of other views.<sup>17</sup>

When attempting to translate his understanding of mutual aid into practical terms, Yanagi attached particular importance to the ideas of guild socialism, and these will now be discussed.

## Yanagi’s Interest in Guild Socialism<sup>18</sup>

Guild socialism was a school of socialism that became influential, mainly in England, from around 1910. It was based on the view that work ought to be enjoyable, that people should not be treated as commodities or as parts of a machine, implying that profit-oriented capitalism needed to be transformed: workers should organize themselves into self-governing guilds, and industry should become controlled by these guilds and subject to the needs of society. While he was promoting his *mingei* movement, Yanagi held high hopes for guild socialism since he believed that the ideal beauty of crafts could not flourish under capitalism, which was driven by the corrupting force of greed.

In 1927 Yanagi actually tried to set up a guild in Kamigamo (上加茂), a district of Kyoto. Although it ended in failure, he remained convinced about the need for guilds. This attempt by Yanagi to put guild socialism into practice, an unusual step for a Japanese intellectual, was perhaps partly prompted by practical undertakings such as Mushanokōji’s New Village, Arishima’s Collective Farm (共生農場), and Eto’s Love of Farming School.

<sup>17</sup> See Nakami (2003), p.276; p.280; (2011), p.264; p.269; (2013), p.52; pp.199-200.

<sup>18</sup> For Yanagi’s reception of guild socialism, see Nakami (2003), chap. 8; (2004); (2011), chap. 8.

There were two schools of thought in guild socialism: the majority view advocated large-scale, nationwide guilds, its principal exponents including A. R. Orage, S. G. Hobson and G. D. Cole; whereas Yanagi sided with those who argued for small-scale locally based guilds, in which he followed the ideas of Arthur J. Penty (1875-1937). Penty, who was born in York, was the first proponent of guild socialism, and worked as an architect; he cherished the beauty of the Middle Ages and advocated the revival of guilds in order to restore this beauty to the modern era. He also admired the Christian morality of the Middle Ages, which had permeated every aspect of daily life, seeing it as a way to return people to a state in which they were not obsessed by greed and profit. He believed that the key to resolving economic problems lay in shifting from the mass production of inferior goods to the optimal production of quality goods, for which prices would be controlled at a fair and stable level. This issue of prices was the reason why he argued for the establishment of local guilds, which he believed would be better able to exercise control over prices than national guilds.

When Penty was introduced to Japan, he was seen as a guild socialist with leanings towards anarchist thought. Inspired by reading Penty's works, in 1927 Yanagi wrote "A Proposal Concerning Craft Guilds" (工芸の協団に関する一提案) and set about establishing a guild. He did not, however, accept all of Penty's ideas: he substituted Buddhism for Christianity, and he emphasized the control of beauty rather than the control of prices.

Yanagi was trying to create his ideal beauty of *mingei*, which was a synthesis of beauty and faith. He believed that "the beauty of crafts is alive in local colour" and that "without a local unit there can be no true development of craft." In his vision, it was necessary to first establish small local groups to facilitate the realization of ideal beauty, and these would then gradually expand to cover wider areas; he therefore argued that national guilds were not an immediate issue.

Many Japanese intellectuals who emphasized "communities" at around the same time as Yanagi saw Japan as the natural leader of a community which would expand across Asia (the East Asia Community), and so they were ultimately drawn into the idea of the Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere. But because Yanagi clung to the idea of local guilds, and since he held a philosophy of peace which rejected all forms of violence, he was able to avoid siding with the militarism and expansionist nationalism of the Japanese regime.



## Concluding Remarks

Yanagi dreamt of realizing a culturally pluralistic society in which peoples and regions could each exhibit their cultural individuality. He did not take the view, prevalent at the time, that ranked the cultures of various peoples in accordance with the degree to which they had absorbed modern Western civilization. He desired rather to dismantle imperial Japan as an imitation of the modern West and to replace it with a Japan that exhibited its “original nature.” In such a society, all peoples, including minorities within and outside Japan, instead of modeling themselves on the modern West or its Japanese imitation (*i.e.* imperial Japan) would coexist as equal entities, with each making full use of their own particular cultural resources. Yanagi warned against the “strong” imposing their cultural values on the “weak” from a sense of superiority: he urged dissimilar peoples to learn from each other, while yet recognizing their differences, and so become enriched by their contact. He also advised the “weak” not to allow themselves to be daunted by the “strong,” which meant losing their self-confidence and becoming psychological slaves, but instead to take pride in their own culture. Thus Yanagi wanted the “weak” to rise up and become the equals of any others, but he cautioned against the danger of the erstwhile “weak,” having improved their position, turning into the new “strong” and becoming persecutors themselves.

The life of Yanagi, as described in this paper, justifies characterizing him as a modern Japanese thinker who was free from the “oppression transfer” mindset into which the great majority of Japanese had fallen at the time.

The question of how to promote one’s own culture in a form which renders it accessible to the outside world is a problem which has still not been solved. Today, in the midst of rapid globalization, and the ongoing standardization of values, diversity is being lost from our societies, and our tolerance for differences is diminishing. At the same time, there is a relentless chain of violence resulting in the loss of so many lives, and there are also many people around the world who find themselves in conditions where not even a minimum standard of living is guaranteed. Surely with the world in such a parlous state, we should be looking for methods, and especially for mental attitudes, which allow the enjoyment of one’s own culture whilst being fully engaged with other cultures: some clues to this kind of approach can be found in the life of Yanagi, who emphasized the

viewpoints of “composite beauty” and nonviolence, and also aspired to multicultural and multiethnic coexistence.

## Bibliography

- Arishima, Takeo. 1985. *Complete Works of Arishima Takeo* (有島武郎全集). Vols. 11 & 13. Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō.
- Brandt, Lisbeth Kim. 2007. *Kingdom of Beauty: Mingei and the Politics of Folk Art in Imperial Japan*. Durham, NC: Duke UP.
- Cahm, Caroline. 1989. *Kropotkin and the Rise of Revolutionary Anarchism, 1872-1886*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- Glass, S. T. 1966. *The Responsible Society: The Ideas of the English Guild Socialist*. London: Longmans.
- Kiernan, Rev. Edward J. 1941. *Arthur J. Penty: His Contribution to Social Thought*. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America P.
- Kikuchi, Yūko. 2004. *Japanese Modernisation and Mingei Theory: Cultural Nationalism and Oriental Orientalism*. London: Routledge Curzon.
- Kropotkin, Peter. 1908. *Mutual Aid*. London: William and Heinemann.
- Kumakura, Isao. 1978. *Discovery of Mingei* (民芸の発見). Tokyo: Kadokawa.
- Kurata, Takashi et al., eds. 2012. *Lessons in "Mingei": The Techniques of Unskillfulness* ("民藝"のレッスン—つたなさの技法). Tokyo: Firumu Ātosha.
- Matthews, Frank. 1979. "The Ladder of Becoming: A. R. Orage, A. J. Penty, and the Origins of Guild Socialism in England." *Ideology and the Labour Movement: Essays Presented to John Saville*. Edited by David E. Martin et al. London: Croom Helm.
- Mizuo, Hiroshi. 1992. *Critical Biography of Yanagi Sōetsu* (評伝 柳宗悦). Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō.
- Mushanokōji, Saneatsu. 1987-1990. *Complete Works of Mushanokoji Saneatsu* (武者小路実篤全集). Vols. 1-3. Tokyo: Shōgakukan.
- Nakami, Mari. 2003. *The Times and Thought of Yanagi Sōetsu* (柳宗悦時代と思想). Tokyo: Tōkyō Daigaku Shuppankai.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2004. "Guild Socialism and Japan: With a Focus on Its Reception by Yanagi Sōetsu" (ギルド社会主義と日本—柳宗悦の受容を中心として). *The Arts & Crafts Movement and Japan*. Edited by Dezainshi Fōramu (デザイン史フォーラム). Kyoto: Shibunkaku Shuppan.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2005. *A Critical Biography of Yanagi Muneyoshi: The Aesthetic Anarchist* (아나기 무네요시 평전: 미학적 아나키스트). Translated by Kim Soon-hee. Seoul: Hyohyeong.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2006. "From the "Beauty of Sorrow" to "Composite Beauty": Towards a Reconstructing of the Image of Yanagi Muneyoshi" ("悲哀の美"から"複合の美へ"—柳宗悦像の再構築を願う) / "Cultural Memory: The Korea and Japan

- Discovered by Yanagi Muneyoshi” (문화적 기억: 야나기 무네요시가 발견한 조선 그리고 일본). In a Catalogue of Ilmin Museum of Art (일민미술관). Seoul.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2011. *In Pursuit of Composite Beauty: Yanagi Sōetsu, His Aesthetics and Aspiration for Peace*. Melbourne: Trans Pacific Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2013. *Yanagi Sōetsu: His Idea of “Composite Beauty”* (柳宗悦: 「複合の美」의思想). In Iwanami shinsho (岩波新書). Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten.
- Oguma, Eiji. 1998. *The Boundary of the “Japanese”: Okinawa, the Ainu, Taiwan and Korea—From Colonial Domination to the Return Movement* (日本人の境界—沖繩、アイヌ、台湾、朝鮮). Tokyo: Shinyōsha.
- Ōsawa, Masamichi. 1971. *A Study of Ōsugi Sakae* (大杉栄研究). Tokyo: Hosei UP.
- Ōsugi, Sakae. 1964. *Complete Works of Ōsugi Sakae* (大杉栄全集). Vols. 2, 3-5, 14. Tokyo: Gendai Shichosha.
- Ōtsuyama, Kunio. 1974. *A Study on Mushanokōji Saneatsu: To the “New Village”* (武者小路実篤論: 「新しき村」まで). Tokyo: U of Tokyo P.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1978. “Was There a Connection between Ōsugi Sakae and the Shirakaba School?” (大杉栄と白樺派は結びつくか). *Japanese Literature* (国文学) 23: 11.
- Penty, Arthur. 1922. *Post-Industrialism*. London: Allen and Unwin.
- Satomi, Ton. 1979. *Complete Works of Satomi Ton* (里見弴全集). Vol. 10. Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō.
- Shiga, Naoya. 1973-1974. *Complete Works of Shiga Naoya* (志賀直哉全集). Vols. 9 & 10. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten.
- Wada, Kōsaku. 1994. *Eto Tekirei: A Philosopher of “Place”* (江渡狄嶺: 〈場〉の思想). Tokyo: Kōyō Shobō.
- Yanagi, Sōetsu. 1980-1992. *Complete Works of Yanagi Sōetsu* (柳宗悦全集). Vols. 1-22. Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō.