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REIMAGINING DECOLONIZATION IN EAST ASIA

The Mingeikan and Memories of Japan's Colonization of Korea

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Abstract

After discovering beauty in the “folk crafts” (*mingei*) of Korea, Yanagi Sōetsu (1889–1961), an art critic, philosopher, and founder of the Mingei Movement, established the Japan Folk Crafts Museum (Nihon Mingeikan) in 1936. The Mingeikan, with its roots in Japan's colonization of Korea, plays an uneven role in mediating the postmemory (the memory of those with no direct experience of WWII) of the current generation because the museum does not provide explicit reference to its colonial roots in its exhibitions. Yanagi's original sentiments in comparison to the museum's current iteration make for an important case study in understanding how decolonization can occur in Japan. For these reasons it is important to analyze the stakes of unraveling the entangled memories between Japan and Korea within the Mingeikan.

While decolonization is an important lens through which to understand contemporary Japan-Korea relations, the specific practices of “decolonization” need to be adapted, revised, and reconsidered when it comes to the legacy of Japan's imperialism in Korea. This paper takes the Mingeikan as a unique case study to understand how postwar museums in Japan present the history of Japanese colonization in Korea because it does not position itself as a war or peace museum. In order to unravel the historical grief caused by colonialization amidst calls of redress and repatriation, what role do Japanese museums play in erasing or acknowledging Japanese colonial legacies? What current issues make decolonization difficult in Japan? And finally, how does seeing the legacy of Japanese colonialism taking shape in the Mingeikan change our understanding of decolonizing practices?

Keywords

Decolonization, Japan, Korea, mingei, museum, postmemory

About the Author

Christina Mengying Wang is a graduate student in the History Department at the University of California, Santa Cruz. She specializes on the social and cultural history of modern Japan with a focus on Japanese museums, peace, and memory of Japan's imperialist legacies in the 20th century. Her recent fieldwork in Japan focused on how museums and grassroots activist groups in Japan challenge national narratives of World War II memory.

INTRODUCTION

As places of memory-making and education, museums in the 21st century are in need of decolonization more than ever. According to decolonization theorists Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, for colonies once belonging to the Western world, there were two periods of decolonization: the first was a literal return of sovereignty and land through independence movements in the “Third World” (Indonesia, Haiti, Vietnam, India, Pakistan, etc.) while the second phase—what they call decoloniality—occurred in the 1990s and was marked by attempts to overturn the psychological remnants of colonial rule. To Mignolo and Walsh, decoloniality “seeks to make visible, open up, and advance radically distinct perspectives and positionalities that displace *Western* rationality as the only framework and possibility of existence, analysis, and thought” (17, my emphasis). In the case of Japan, its positionality was complicated by the fact that while it had unequal treaties imposed upon it by Western powers, it went on to impose unequal treaties on other Asian countries, beginning with Korea. Conversations on its decolonization are thus invariably entangled in a web binding the “West,” Japan, and “Asia.”

There have been various attempts in recent years to decolonize museum spaces. Since the 1990s, historians of “new museology” have highlighted the museums’ relationship with their audience. Karp, Kreamer, and Levine’s *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture* argued that the relationship between museums and communities is always politicized, and the authors believed that museums should shift from seeing their visitors as passive audience to recognizing them as an active community (24). They argued that museums are an important part of civil society as they are “places for defining who people are and how they should act” but also as “places for challenging those definitions” (4). Amy Lonetree’s *Decolonizing Museums* offered one example where community involvement has helped decolonize museums for indigenous communities in the United States. Lonetree argued that decolonization must involve “assisting our communities in addressing the legacies of historical unresolved grief” (22).

While the decolonization of formerly and presently colonized nations have been considerably studied, the focus of these studies have been mostly on areas that experienced white settler colonialism. In this paper, I ask how the concept of decolonization helps us to further address issues related to Japan’s colonization of Korea between 1910 and 1945. I take the site of a museum entrenched in imperial legacies and national identities to ask why the decolonization of Korea in Japanese public memory has been so difficult and how it complicates our understanding of decolonization models. Although decolonization is an important lens through which to understand contemporary Japan-Korea relations, the specific practices of

“decolonization” need to be adapted, revised, and reconsidered. For the framework of this paper, I suggest that decolonization in this context would look like the acknowledgement of Japan’s aggressive acts in Asia throughout the 20th century by the Japanese government, and the building of a collaborative framework between Japanese, Koreans from the peninsula, and Zainichi (Resident) Koreans in Japan to teach this history.

I argue that the Japan Folk Crafts Museum (*Nihon Mingeikan*, hereafter Mingeikan) is an important space to address the entangled memories between Japan and Korea and a space that signifies the difficulties of decolonization in the context of Japan’s current political climate. While scholars have examined the concept of *mingei* (meaning folk crafts or crafts of the people) and its legacies (Kikuchi; Brandt; Atkins; Nakami; Aso), and others have offered critiques of the nationalist narratives found in Japan’s museums (Sand; Yoshida; Allen and Sakamoto; Takenaka), the historical legacy of this private art museum remains under explored. As a moderately sized art museum with around 30,000 visitors a year (“Mingeikan [in Tokyo]”), the Mingeikan’s direct ties to Japanese colonialism places it in a prime position to address Japanese Korean memories. Yet, it fails to achieve a meaningful decolonizing dialogue.

To begin my discussion of decolonization in the Mingeikan, I will first provide a brief overview of Japan’s colonization of Korea and how the contemporary political climate in Japan has presented challenges to a direct acknowledgment of this legacy. Then, in part one, I cover the entangled history which examines the original encounter with Korean ceramics that led the founder of the Mingeikan, Yanagi Sōetsu, to bring about the Mingei Movement and establish the museum. When considering what decolonization can look like in Japan today, it is useful to start with a complicated figure like Yanagi, who had imperialist views but also advocated for Korean independence at the same time. In the second part, I examine the permanent exhibition space of the Mingeikan, as well as several special exhibitions that were held throughout Japan and South Korea. It should be noted that, while decolonization of the Mingeikan is a good place to start, various museums in contemporary Japan that have sought to directly address Japanese colonialism have met with pressure and opposition from conservative politicians and bureaucrats and right-wing activists, making repatriation, community building, and public education difficult.. In my conclusion, I briefly touch on the Osaka International Center for Peace as an example of a museum that was once equipped to address Japan’s colonial legacy but buckled under the pressure of right-wing nationalists.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

From 1910 to 1945, Korea was under Japanese occupation and its citizens suffered from a number of assimilation policies—from the government's renaming of streets and displacement of the royal dynastic house to forbidding the people from wearing traditional Korean clothing or practicing ancestor worship. Amid this history of high political tension and calls for national independence by Koreans, the Japanese Folk Crafts Movement (*mingei undō*), founded by Yanagi Sōetsu (born as Yanagi Muneyoshi, Sōetsu is an alternative reading to his name) (1889–1961) was perceived to be a rarity. Yanagi believed Korean *mingei* (translated roughly as folk art, folk craft, or art of the people) would be erased under the modernizing rule of the Japanese empire and sought to preserve its beauty. Yanagi (an author, artist, and philosopher) has been praised by artists, theorists, and academics in Japan, Korea, and the United States, for not only his appreciation of Korean arts, but also his criticism of the Japanese imperial state and their oppressive policies. For this reason, the Mingeikan founded by Yanagi in 1926 could be seen a common sensical vehicle for decolonization. However, despite a point of origin in which Japanese colonization of Korea was viewed critically, the Mingeikan today does not account for Japan's colonial legacy and thus cannot be said to be on a path toward decolonization.

For Korea, the first stage of decolonization as defined by Mignolo and Walsh came about with the defeat of imperial Japan in World War II. The process was shaped by the immediate arrival of U.S. and Soviet Union troops and the rise of Cold War tensions that soon erupted into the Korean War. However, decolonization was not resolved with just the removal of nonindigenous actors and the Japanese colonial state machinery. Instead, in the south, the previous regime was replaced by the apparatus of the U.S. informal empire. According to Deokhyo Choi, “[t]he U.S. Occupation delegitimized spreading Korean demands for a fully liberated nation, both politically and socio-economically... For many Koreans, U.S. occupation policy did appear as a ‘continuation of colonialism,’ if not European but Japanese colonialism” (14). The arrival of the U.S. and Soviet Union thrust the Korean peninsula into the Cold War, which profoundly affected Korea's ability to determine for itself the boundaries of its state, citizens, and independence.

Japan, too, faced a military occupation by the United States, its rise and fall as an economic power, and changing relations with China and Southeast Asia—all of which delayed its ability to address its wartime past. A struggle over war memory in Japan has been ongoing since the end of World War II, and in recent decades, Korean and Japanese activists and scholars have done a great deal of work on gathering evidence and recovering the voices of Koreans during Japan's colonization of the peninsula, shedding light on atrocities committed by the Japanese military.

Perhaps the best-known example is that of the sexual slavery experienced by the so-called “comfort women,” brought to international attention with the compelling testimony of Kim Hak-sun in the early 1990s. Kim, a former comfort woman (*ianfu*) was forced into sexual slavery for the Japanese army during WWII. Her testimony revealed the horrifying realities many Korean and Asian women faced during the war and the direct involvement by the Japanese military government. However, discussion of comfort women and other atrocities committed by the Japanese military government generally disappeared from Japanese history textbooks in the 2000s as the heavy-handed influence of Japan’s conservative party, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), silenced the testimonies of victims (Watanabe 237–238).

The struggle over Japan’s war memory has been dubbed “history wars” or “memory wars” by scholars (Lewis; Schmid). These issues have been extensively analyzed in the geopolitical realm of textbook education (Yoshiko), social politics (Seraphim), and memorial sites (Chun; Shim). Museums in Japan are not removed from the political struggle over war memory, yet the role of Japanese museums in the decolonization of public memory is relatively under examined. Decolonization on every front is important, as Duus reminds us that the long-term danger of not resolving Japan’s “history wars” will result in a nurturing of ethnic stereotyping that “hardens into ethnic hatred” (12). Scholars have critiqued museums like the Yushūkan (attached to the infamous Yasukuni Shrine) for its presentation of WWII as Japan’s “holy war” (Sturgeon; Yoshida; Takenaka) while scholars have praised others, like the Women’s Active Museum for Peace and War and the Grassroots House, for their explicit critique of Japanese aggression in WWII (Watanabe; Yamane). Yoshida notes that a third type of museum exists in Japan which “attempts to avoid controversial issues such as the moral evaluation of war” but is ultimately met with dispute for its passive narrative (17). Unlike the museums above, the Mingeikan’s narrative is not about experiences of the War. However, because of its deep entanglements in Japan’s colonization of Korea, the Mingeikan is a prime location to examine the uneven application of decolonizing strategies in Japan.

ENTANGLED MEMORY: YANAGI, *MINGEI*, AND KOREA

After the Meiji Restoration of 1868, the Japanese state pursued rapid military and industrial expansion, heralding the beginning of a modern state. Adapting political, scientific, and economic systems from Europe and the United States, the Japanese government pursued imperialist expansion and colonialism into Asia. Japan acquired Taiwan in 1895 and Korea in 1905. It was in this context of

rapid industrialization and colonial expansion that Yanagi Sōetsu and his friends encountered Korean products. Yanagi was born in Meguro Ward, Tokyo in 1889. He graduated from Gakushuin High School in England and became a member of the *Shirakaba* (White Birch) literary school which thought highly of Western aesthetics and retained a goal of spreading Western art and literature into Japan. In 1914, Yanagi was gifted a jar from the Yi dynasty (1392–1897) by Asakawa Noritaka (1884–1964), an amateur art collector who was stationed in Korea as a teacher. This jar is cited by the Mingeikan's website as the catalyst for Yanagi's fascination with wares from the Joseon era (1392–1910). In 1925, Yanagi and his colleagues coined the term *mingei*, a term meaning “folk crafts” or “common crafts” to describe the Korean ceramics he encountered. In 1926, they founded the Mingei Movement, which celebrated the beauty of everyday objects made by ordinary people. Yanagi repeatedly expressed a desire to “define a new standard of art” after he had “discovered beauty” in craft objects of 20th century Korea. As Korean *mingei* was characterized by its simplicity and ability to conjure nostalgic feelings of the premodern past, its artistry represented an alternative to the “modernization”—specifically industrialization—that Japan was rapidly adopting in the 20th century. As part of this movement, Yanagi and his friends published books and essays, held lectures and exhibitions in both Korea and Japan, and eventually established the Mingeikan in 1936.

EAST MEETS WEST MEETS ASIA

Although Korean objects provided a catalyst, Yanagi's exposure to Western enlightenment thought is what ultimately inspired him to develop the concept of *mingei*: Yanagi was dissatisfied with aspects of Western modernization, as he was already starting to witness the environmental degradation caused by industrialization. At the same time, Nakami Mari argues that Yanagi was inspired by a different line of Western thought which was marked by an increased awareness of individuality, decentralization of state power, and interest in socialism (xxviii) that marked the post-Russo-Japanese War generation. In this context, *mingei* was born in a time when some people turned toward folk culture, everyday life, and rural customs as “an antimodernist reaction against urban industrialization” (Brandt, *Kingdom of Beauty* 1). This was by no means an isolated phenomenon in Japan, as Yanagi's inspiration for the Mingei Movement came in part from the 1880s Arts and Crafts Movement, started by William Morris (1834–1896) and John Ruskin (1819–1900) in England to challenge the industrialization they saw as bringing about the destruction of humanity's sense of beauty. Like the Arts and

Crafts Movement, the Mingei Movement critiqued urbanization, industrialization, and rationalization. Yanagi defined *mingei* as a philosophy in which egoless and unself-conscious beauty could provide a model for an alternative to the Western “modernist” ideals in the post-Enlightenment era (Moeran 97).

However, scholars like Kikuchi and Inaga have argued that, rather than representing a complete break with the West, Yanagi’s fascination with Korea resulted from and contributed to what Kikuchi calls “Oriental Orientalism.” For Kikuchi, Yanagi constructed his own version of “tōyō” (the East) to create a narrative of “Asianess,” which he used to measure the distinct beauty of *mingei* (*Japanese Modernization* 73). Inaga argues that this “Asianness” was believed to be superior by Yanagi and his circle because it was constructed by a non-European colonizer, but it adopted some of the same tropes and gestures. In other words, Yanagi’s imperialist attitude must be understood in the context of Japan’s “emergence as a self-appointed authority on Asian modernity” (Bailey, “Yanagi Soetsu” 120).

YANAGI’S “PEACE” AND THE KOREAN FOLK-ARTS GALLERY

Yanagi has been praised by various postcolonial Japanese (and some Korean) artists and authors for attempts to “preserve” the culture of Korea. Author Mizuo Hiroshi (1930-2022), for example, commented favorably on Yanagi for treating Koreans respectfully and for urging the government to respect their independent culture during a time when the government was enforcing rapid assimilation (Kikuchi, “The Myth of Yanagi’s Originality” 248). Journalists and scholars today have also praised Yanagi’s legacy by arguing that he was one of the only Japanese intellectuals who “demonstrated solidarity with the colonized Koreans” (Bailey, “The Centenary” 1), but he was also met with criticism which I will address later in the paper.

Yanagi’s writings on Korea do show a desire to unite and appreciate the culture of Korea. He openly criticizes the assimilationist strategies of the Japanese government at the time: “We are even trying to change the way Koreans think... We teach them Japanese morals and the graces of the imperial family, which have nothing whatsoever to do with them” (Yanagi, “Chōsen jin” 23–32). Scholars also accredit the government’s decision to cancel the demolition of Kwanghwamun gate (a historical landmark in Korea) to the influence of Yanagi’s article “Ushinawaren to suru ichi Chōsen kenchiku no tame ni” (The Historic Korean Monument Slated for Demolition) (Bailey, “The Centenary” 8). In 2016, the inheritors of the Japan

Folk Craft Museum (Mingeikan) in Tokyo wrote favorably on his attitude toward Korean folk arts:

It was not only products that Yanagi paid attention to. In Korea, the right to people's self-determination was forfeited at that time, and moreover the assimilation policy was forced by the Japanese government. Yanagi, going against the times, highly esteemed the culture of Korean people, and appealed for preservation and protection of it. It was very natural for Yanagi to admire people who have produced splendid products he loved. ("The Beauty of Korean Crafts")

Indeed, in reaction to the repressive assimilation strategies proposed by the Japanese government at the time, Yanagi's voice in support of the Koreans was of the minority. Nakami sees Yanagi's fight to protect Korean culture as an embodiment of "peace."

To show good will to the Koreans, Yanagi opened the *Chōsen minzoku bijutsukan* (Korean Folk-Arts Gallery) in 1924 on the grounds of the Kyongbokkung Palace. However, this space was only available due to the co-optation of this palace by the Japanese colonial government. The Japanese takeover served as a political statement that not only disrupted the layout of the royal garden but overruled the Korean royal family's claim over the land. By then holding two expositions on the palace grounds, the Japanese governor-general juxtaposed a narrative of development against "Koreanness" (Henry 19). By physically marking Korea with Japanese "cultural" infrastructure and effectively dethroning the Korean Imperial Household, the Japanese imperial state was able to deepen its claim to Korean territory. Nevertheless, several members of the Korean independence movement attended the opening ceremony of Yanagi's museum (Horlyck 123).

In his writings on the Korean Folk-Arts Gallery, Yanagi proposed that Japan and Korea should be able to form a warm relationship through an understanding of art. In an idealistic manner, Yanagi sought to preserve the beauty of handicrafts that he believed were gradually disappearing (*senji inmetsu*). Because the only Korean works that the general populace in Japan knew of at the time were from the Goryeo (Kōrai) dynasty (918–1392), their understandings of Korean artistry did not pass the 14th century. The Korean Folk-Arts Gallery was established to prevent an "unfortunate dissipation" (Yanagi, *Chōsen wo omou* 90) of Korean culture like they once faced in the past (at the hand of China) and might face in the future. Rather than a cold space, Yanagi hoped to make the museum a "place where Japanese and Korean people can meet and converse without reservation (*kokoro okinaku katariau bashō*)" (93). That is, Yanagi had the goal of "uniting" Korea and Japan through a mutual understanding that would occur in the space of the Korean Folk-Arts Gallery. But they would not be meeting as equals.

THE AUTHORITARIAN ATTITUDE OF YANAGI

Yanagi's fight for the preservation of other cultures undoubtedly deserves praise, but at the same time it is undeniable that he used *mingei* to promote a national Japanese culture, thereby "promoting an aesthetics of colonialism" (Kim Yunsu quoted in Bailey, "The Aestheticization" 32). To Yanagi, the "beauty of sorrow" (*hiai no bi*) was a distinct marker of Korean folk arts. In his 1919 pamphlet, "Thoughts about Korean People" (*Chōsen jin wo omou*), Yanagi depicts Korean history as dreary: "When anyone looks at Korean history, there is no one who is not overwhelmed by the dark (*ankoku*) and miserable (*hisan*) time in their history full of fear (*kyōfu*)" (25). "They want power and money, too," Yanagi writes. "But more than anything, they want humanity (*ninjō*)" (27). Scholars from both South Korea and Japan have criticized Yanagi's "beauty of sorrow" narrative, arguing that Yanagi's understanding of Korean history was "misguided" because it was used to juxtapose a Japan that was capable of protecting its neighbors. For example, even as he sought to elevate a new form of tea wares discovered from Korea, Yanagi praised the cultural superiority of Japan: "If Ido bowls had not been recognized in Japan, their beauty might not have been perceived in Korea or elsewhere. Japan became the native land of the Ido Tea-bowl" (Yanagi, "Kizaemon" 193). Yanagi's evaluation of a pitiful Korea ultimately ends with a proclamation that as a Japanese national, he has the right to "preserve" the arts of Korea, thereby reinforcing Japan's superiority as a modern state with artistic sense and as a legitimate colonial power.

As Yanagi's writings demonstrate, the veneration of Korean crafts as a standard of humble beauty was linked to the perception that the source of its beauty lay in a rural past that preceded the dominance of the modern Japanese metropole. Kim Brandt writes: "the meanings and value that Yanagi and his cohort of literati-collectors successfully attached to Korean objects were instrumental in the reproduction of Japanese colonial power" (713). In this light, the establishment of a craft museum in Korea physically stitched together the metropole and colonies, acting as a vehicle for Yanagi to "preserve" Korean culture while maintaining his control over it.

Ultimately, Yanagi was able to achieve several goals by 1936: "By co-opting the Chosŏn works to frame his discourse, Yanagi was able to publicly vent his resentment toward the Japanese colonial administration, campaign for the return of Korean autonomy, and highlight the suffering of colonial Koreans" (Bailey, "The Aestheticization" 29), all the while promoting *mingei* as an art form that should not be forgotten. To uncover the degree to which Yanagi simply used his surroundings to his advantage to promote the Mingei Movement or whether he cared about Korea is not the object of this paper, but merely to emphasize the art form's Korean roots and history. Given the vibrancy of this cross-cultural exchange, the Mingeikan

might be seen, thus, as a relatively easy case for decolonization. However, as shown below, there remain challenges.

DETANGLED MEMORY: THE JAPANESE FOLK CRAFTS MUSEUM (NIHON MINGEIKAN)

In her *Inheritance of Loss*, Yukiko Koga studied museums as a “contact zone” between Japanese visitors and Chinese citizens in the northern Chinese region that once belonged to the Japanese empire, such as the St. Sophia Cathedral in Harbin, the Manchukuo Museum in Changchun, and the red-light district in Dalian. In particular, Koga considers the postgeneration—“the ‘generation after’ that bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before” (Hirsch 5)—of Japanese students and workers who had to reconcile with the “inheritance” of guilt and a sense of responsibility for their predecessors’ actions. Koga suggests that trauma was not one-sided and that cross-cultural exchange ignited critical self-reflection for all parties involved. In this, Koga draws from Cathy Caruth: “history, like trauma, is never simply one’s own, that history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other’s traumas” (24). While the reconciliation process that Koga witnessed between Japanese visitors and local Chinese took place in the homeland of the colonized, the postgeneration of Zainichi (Resident) Koreans and Japanese continues to live with trauma inherited from the colonial past overlaid on top of Japan’s current political landscape. The Mingeikan as a space that was founded from cross-cultural exchange yet exists in the present as a signifier of national Japanese artistic identity suggests that the museum could also become a “contact zone” for the postgeneration within Japan.

Although the Korean Folk-Arts Gallery marked the beginning of Yanagi’s attempt at “sharing” the beauty of folk crafts, the Mingei Movement was largely unsuccessful in attracting a wider public audience in Japan until Yanagi revealed his idea for the Mingeikan at the 1928 Tokyo Industrial Exposition in Ueno. Following the success of this exhibition, Yanagi opened the Japan Folk Crafts Museum (*Nihon Mingeikan*) in Meguro ward, Tokyo in 1936. In mobilizing for the war, practitioners of the Mingei Movement emphasized aesthetics and *mingei* as a “national [Japanese] culture” (Brandt, *Kingdom of Beauty* 116) and the focus turned away from Korea to Japan.

LOCATING KOREA IN THE MINGEIKAN

Today, Korea is not completely removed from descriptions of the Mingeikan on its website or pamphlets, but its framing leaves much to be desired. First, for many, the first point of exposure to the Mingeikan might be its website, which provides general information about the museum's location and hours of operation as well as its special exhibitions and events. If one is unfamiliar with *mingei*, they can navigate the "About" section of the website in either Japanese or English (no Korean). At a glance, the objects catalogued on the Mingeikan's website seem to follow Yanagi's criteria: simple, utilitarian, and "unassuming"; simply put they are characterized as items "used in daily life." The three main themes that continue to penetrate today's Mingeikan exhibitions are beauty, daily life, and the folk. The history of the museum provided on the website carries on Yanagi's initial vision of "living a life of beauty" (*bi no seikatsu-ka*) with the goals of the museum being researching, collecting, preserving, and managing folk art items ("History"). However, except for mentioning the Korean Folk-Art Museum as the predecessor of the Mingeikan, the historical narrative presented on the museum website does not mention any experience of colonialism or Japan's imperial past, other than a single acknowledgement that Korea was a "colony at that time" (*tōji shokuminchi datta Chōsen*) and that Yanagi had criticized the policies of the Japanese government in Korea. Without deeper historical context, the narrative presents Korean crafts as if they were mere catalysts to the awakening of Japanese artistic sensibility and the emergence of Japan's own folk artists.

Inside the physical museum, visitors are greeted by a grand entrance way with three imposing yet inviting staircases. The first floor consists of four rooms, one of which is the museum shop, while the second floor also holds four rooms with one large gallery space dedicated to special exhibitions. The biggest room on the second floor is the first permanent exhibition gallery and named the "Korean Craft Room." Inside the display cases are many pieces of pottery, decorative boxes, tea kettles, maps, and paintings. In the Korea room, each object is labeled with a single black card with orange characters written in a calligraphic style describing what the object is (Decorative Box, Jar, Lunch Box, etc.), the material (lacquer, woodwork, painting, etc.), and the time period when applicable. The minimal, yet attractive labeling is a means for visitors to appreciate the objects for their artistic value. Noriko Aso notes, regarding this lack of contextualizing signage in the prewar Mingeikan: "Contextual historical lineage—the heart of the imperial art-history project and its museums—was dismissed as a displacement of engagement with the object itself" (158). In a 1947 essay titled "The Japanese Folk Crafts Museum," Yanagi writes that the museum's goals were not to focus on the past, but the future.

To Yanagi, “[t]he value of an object lies in its beauty; everything else is secondary . . . qualities represented by riches and power are of minor importance” (Yanagi quoted in Aso 220). The fact that the labels have not changed since the first opening of the museum is a testament to how the Mingeikan continues to maintain Yanagi’s beliefs. Kyoko Mimura, the current director of international Programmes at the Mingeikan also commented that “Mr. Yanagi’s idea was to ‘see first, think later.’ Rather than reading a description, he felt that an intuitive response to beauty was very important” (Mimura).

The *mingei* concept of the “unknown craftsmen” is another reason why visitors cannot find the producer’s names on the placards. Within the wider community of arts and crafts in Japan *mingei* exists as a niche, sometimes subsumed under the category of *kōgei* (also meaning crafts). According to a Japanese blog dedicated to Japanese crafts, one key feature that differentiates the two is that *mingei* objects are born out of the everyday lives of local people while *kōgei* objects are revered for their unique materials, technique, and treated more as works of art (“Shitteru yōde shiranai”). While potters and artisans were now being identified next to their works in the postwar period within the Japanese movement, there was no comparable development for Korean wares. For example, in the most recent special exhibition titled “New Works Competition and Exhibition, 2024,” names like Kota Arinaga, Yuka Takami, Kouichi Touji, and Yakimono Yamajo are featured next to their objects (“2024 Japan Folk Craft Museum Exhibition”). In contrast, there are no named Korean potters in the information provided regarding Korean artifacts in the Mingeikan. The tension between “unknown craftsmen” in the Korea room and the named artisans of other countries (especially Japan) is one that is not addressed in the museum.

The Korean roots of *mingei* are not only barely visible in the Mingeikan but also in a national and international setting. Outside of the Mingeikan, *mingei* is also often presented without any context. For example, in 2023, the Modern Museum of Art, Tokyo (MOMAT) held a special exhibition titled *100 Years of Mingei*. In its online description, there is no mention of Korea anywhere. The exhibition introduction used the following narrative: “What was the historical context of Mingei’s emergence and evolution? From the Great Kantō Earthquake of 1923, growth of the railway network, the rise of tourism to war and the Japanese nation-state, and rapid postwar economic growth, the Folk Crafts Movement is inextricably linked to modernization and its development has paralleled major milestones in society” (The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo). On the other hand, when Korea is mentioned, it is discussed as the “backdrop” for the discovery of a Japanese form of art. For example, the Mingei International Museum in San Diego frames the conceptualization of *mingei* as something that “opened the eyes of Koreans to their long-dismissed and anonymous artistic legacy” (“About”). Neither description is

productive for the case of decolonization. In fact, the latter replicates the hierarchy found within colonialism and in Yanagi's own contradictory nature, wherein the autonomy of Korean folk artisans is dismissed.

REPATRIATION, RECONCILIATION, COLLABORATION

As previously mentioned, one of the difficulties in decolonization is the Japanese government's heavy-handed influence on public education regarding war history; the same can be said about the repatriation of cultural property. Museums such as the British Museum or the Smithsonian often have to deal with demands that they return stolen national treasures, human remains, and ceremonial goods (Harris). Despite the *Mingeikan*'s flaws, decolonization is not impossible. So what would decolonization look like? There is no international law that forces Japan to return cultural properties belonging to Korea: the "future [of repatriation] is a matter of goodwill and policy" (Yoshiaki 202). The few studies of repatriation between Japan and Korea focus on governments rather than individuals and their private collections. At most, the Japanese government has stated that "the voluntary donation of art objects originating in Korea to the Korean side by the Japanese owners is 'commendable'" (Yoshiaki 204). While neither North nor South Korea have demanded a return of *mingei* items per se, between 2001 and 2017, the South Korean government has negotiated the return of 5139 objects, many of which are Buddhist statues. However, the South Korean government is aware of the global spread of their crafts, as government agencies have published catalogs of "cultural properties" located overseas (C. Kim 608).

How can the *Mingeikan* decolonize if the original creators of its objects do not demand for a return of their cultural property? What are the demands of Koreans for decolonization, and how might they relate to the *Mingeikan*? How might the collaboration that is key to decolonization be achieved? Below, I examine a few cases where the *Mingeikan* has worked with South Korea in the production of catalogs and exhibits related to *mingei*. I argue that while some cross-cultural exchange has occurred, further steps have yet to be taken for fostering continued relations between not only the curators and artists but for visitors as well. These difficulties are not necessarily inherent to the *Mingeikan* but link to the larger political atmosphere that affects how such decolonial actions such as repatriation, reconciliation, and collaboration can be pursued in Japan.

In 1993, The Korean Foundation published the first volume of *Ilbon sojang Han'guk munhwajae* (Korean Relics in Japan) in partnership with the Mingeikan curators and catalogued the Korean objects held specifically at the Mingeikan. The introduction states that the purpose of this catalog and related volumes is “to better preserve Korea’s artistic heritage and introduce it to our friends in other cultures as well as to our own people” (*Ilbon sojang Han'guk munhwajae*, Foreward). The volume contains a number of photo plates from a selection of the 650 ceramic pieces, 210 paintings, 510 craft objects, and 100 miscellaneous objects held at the Mingeikan, along with labels of all items in storage recorded in the museum’s format. At the end of this volume, the book’s editorial advisory board praises Yanagi, characterizing Yanagi as having a “keen interest and knowledge of the quality of the art” even as “Korean historians have yet to make a clear-cut definition of folk painting” (Yu 337). Another Korean contributor wrote that Japan’s Mingei Movement provided a “deserving evaluation of Korean handicraft arts as fertile ground for re-creating beauty” as “[w]e Koreans failed to give wooden handicrafts and works of other traditional folk arts . . . the high regard they deserved” (Yeh 341). The fact that an entire volume is dedicated to Korean works in the Mingeikan speaks to the volume of Korean objects in Yanagi’s collection. As the catalog was written in collaboration with the Mingeikan, the praise by the contributors may contain bias. However, the fact that these works are being collected in catalog form rather than a recollection through repatriation means that repatriation might not be an effective decolonizing strategy for the Mingeikan.

Mingei as a framework has also held some level of popularity in South Korea. The Modern Museum of Contemporary Art (MMCA) in Seoul held an exhibition on Yanagi between May 25 and July 21, 2013. The exhibit showcased 139 works and texts by Yanagi, who is described in one newspaper article as “one of the first in his country to accept Western influence on art and literature in the early 1900s” (Lee). According to the museum, the goal for the audience was to appreciate Yanagi’s *mingei* as “his aesthetics” (MMCA). Despite such praise for Yanagi during the time of this exhibit, many South Korean newspapers published articles that reminded the populace about Yanagi’s controversial association of Korea with “sorrow.” According to an article in *The Korean Herald*: “Yanagi associated Joseon’s art with sorrowfulness and simplicity while Chinese art was associated with power and shape, and Japanese art with pleasure and colors” (Lee). This sentiment is also reflected by another journalist who wrote: “[H]e said Korean traditional art had ‘beauty of sorrow’ as the country has long suffered indignities at the hands of foreign countries, including Japan” (Moon). Moon stresses that Yanagi was criticized by poet Choi Ha-rin as far back as 1974: “[Yanagi’s] view was ‘in accordance with the cultural policy of Japanese imperialists in the colonial period, who tried to make Koreans have a sense of defeat and shame about their history’” (Moon). Horlyck also offers a critique of Yanagi, saying that “[he] saw sorrow and sadness in the

colors and lines of Chosŏn porcelain [while] postcolonial Korean artists and scholars found robustness and strength” (137).

Although some South Korean journalists and authors remind readers about the controversial legacy of Yanagi, there are no newspapers which have critiqued the continued existence of places like the Mingeikan. While critiques are aimed at Yanagi and his legacy, few interrogate the activities of the Mingeikan and the continued exhibitions on *mingei* throughout both countries. At the same time, rarely does the Mingeikan write about collaboration with Korean folk-art artisans—one of the only instances being the invitation of three South Korean cultural property and furniture restoration specialists for an exhibit in 2016 (Haruhara). As of 2024, the Mingeikan has not made any announcements regarding its activities towards reconciliation, repatriation, or collaboration.

CONCLUSIONS: THE POST-MEMORY—TOWARDS DECOLONIZATION

In this investigation of the history of *mingei* and the Mingeikan, my aim was to shed light on how a Japanese craft is entangled within a complicated geopolitical context of past, present, and future between Japan and Korea. While decolonization between Japan and Korea is in various ways different from the decolonization movements of indigenous communities around the world, its study underscores the need for ongoing decolonization of our world system. Not only is Japan still in an early phase of the second stage decolonization, but even in a place like the Mingeikan, which might seem to be relatively easy to decolonize, such is not the case.

The discussion of Yanagi and *mingei* reveals the fact that, despite his calls to “protect” Korea during the colonial era, he never perceived Korea to be an equal. To ignore the colonial entanglements of an art movement and museum predicated on Japan’s colonization of Korea would be a disservice to the voices fighting historical revisionism in Japan. To unpack the double identity of Yanagi, the Mingeikan needs to engage in decolonization. The fact that *mingei* is understood today as a marker of Japanese identity even though a large number of the Mingeikan’s collection originated from Korea is testament to how the legacy of Japan’s former empire remains understated or even obscured. While repatriation is not a particularly relevant issue for the Mingeikan, the museum could provide more context on the historical legacies related to its founding. The museum should focus on providing more context in its displays and descriptions, collaborating with Koreans in

South Korea and in Japan, and building an intergenerational and international community that is aware of the political nature of *mingei* and Yanagi's legacy. If the Mingeikan actively engaged in decolonization, it could become a space in which a postgeneration of Japanese, ethnic Koreans, and Koreans from the peninsula could engage with each other in a productive way.

However, in adopting these changes, the Mingeikan would put itself in a vulnerable position and face potential backlash and pushback from right-wing Japanese supporters. Such was the case with one museum in Osaka called the Osaka International Center for Peace (hereafter Peace Osaka). Peace Osaka, was established in 1991 through public funds to teach young people about the history of World War II (Yamane 138). Major parts of its exhibit addressed the acts of aggression committed by the Japanese military throughout the Asia-Pacific during WWII (Seaton 5). However, in 2013, due to pressure from the mayor and ultranationalist groups, the museum was forced to discard and overhaul all of its exhibits on Japan's invasion of China and Southeast Asia and the colonization of Korea, Taiwan, and Manchuria. It is not entirely a surprise, then, that in a survey conducted by peace museum scholar Yamane Kazuyo, out of almost 6000 registered museums in Japan, only a handful explicitly showcase Japan's devastating acts in Asia during WWII (Yamane 10). The case of Peace Osaka demonstrates that museums in Japan have significant hurdles to overcome, proving that decolonizing the Mingeikan is not a simple task. Indeed, decolonization for the Mingeikan would be a difficult mission to pursue in the current political climate in Japan. Yet, if the Mingeikan were to take such steps, it could do more than looking backwards in time; rather, it will be able to contribute, as Yanagi himself argued, to a peaceful future.

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