Exoticism and Nostalgia
Consuming Southeast Asian Handicrafts in Japan

By Ayami Nakatani

One of the latest consumer trends in Japan can be glossed as the ‘Asian boom’ (asian-boom) – a social phenomenon in which the consumption of various material objects, mostly textiles and other craft items from ‘Asia’, has become a popular trend. Japan is indeed known for its intensive consumerism, yet this latest trend offers a prime example of a ‘cross-cultural consumption’ – a phenomenon that has been subject to increasing analysis in consumer culture studies. Towards the end of the 1990s, glossy magazines directed at middle-aged, married women started featuring a variety of textiles, basketry, furniture, and tableware from various countries in Southeast Asia, such as Indonesia, Thailand, and Vietnam. Other magazines, targeting a younger readership, soon followed this trend. Such editorial trends correspond to a more general tendency in which increasing attention is paid to various goods from these countries.

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

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

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

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

Cravings for narratives

The general wish of prospective buyers to have detailed knowledge of the sites of production or even of the personal knowledge of the exact maker of an item of their interest may prove impossible. To compensate for this, the magazine articles and shop owners are willing to provide some ideas about the context of production in highly romanticized tones.

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

From the viewpoint of Japanese consumers, however, such background knowledge of particular objects matters, because the ‘imagination works on objects to turn commodities ... into sometimes very significant possessions, which draw their power from biographical experiences and the stories [about them]’ (Hoskins 1996:19). Their differentiated and personalized possessions will, in turn, be incorporated into their own stories. The narratives are generally expressed by means of a tasteful display of carefully selected objects on one’s central stage: the home.

Home as feminized space

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

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

For example, a woman who skilfully coordinates furniture and decorative items of varied style and origin declares: ‘The entire interior of my house is an aggregate of the things that have attracted me’. Her successful arrangement is attributed to her ‘deciding eye’, selecting only high-quality items (Plus One Living 2000:35). Another woman describes her home as ‘a stage for my favourite things’: the space that ‘becomes more and more like herself as she decorates it’ (Plus One Living 2000:31).

In the words of Featherstone (1987, p.59), these people seem to represent the ‘new heroes of consumer culture’, who ‘make lifestyle a life project and display their individuality and sense of style in the particularity of the settings of their own homes’. By creating an individual’s own central stage: the home, they objectify and present the latter as their cultural background. From the viewpoint of Japanese consumers, however, such an Orientalist view of Asia, – Japan – Japan as firmly merged with Asia, though geo-politically separate, is justified by the existence of an ancestral connection. Thus the shared memory is there, and is only waiting to be called back. It is equally noted that Asia, including Japan, is the ‘other’ to the West.

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

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

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

References


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