

# Considering undercurrents in Japanese cultural heritage management: the logic of actualisation and the preservation of the present

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The aim of this chapter is to analyse two undercurrents in Japanese cultural heritage management. The first of these is the ‘logic of actualisation’, or the way in which the past is brought up to date in the present. This is a long-standing traditional approach towards the

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past in Japan, and also helps distinguish Japanese cultural heritage management from approaches taken in Europe. The other undercurrent is a recent phenomenon that can be observed not only in Japan but also in many other late-modern societies across the World: that is, the preservation of the present. Examining these two undercurrents helps us understand the particular situation in which Japan finds itself today in terms of cultural heritage management.

### **The logic of actualisation**

In Europe, people's conception of time seems in part informed by the presence of historic monuments and museums. In this cultural context, many old buildings retain their original use and function socially as monuments. These monuments, through their very presence, visually represent history in its continuity, and people thus come to acknowledge a linear notion of time by seeing them in their everyday life. There are also many museums in Europe; in fact, the very concept of the museum first emerged in European countries. These museums collect and display old objects, or antiquities, that are otherwise inaccessible to the public, and by so doing deprive these objects of their original use and grant them a status as historic items. Museum objects thus become more than just embodiments of the past, since they actively instil the concept of linear history in the observer's mind.

'Museums are primarily intended for objects that do not belong to us. They come from far back in the past, and we have inherited them from previous generations, and our first duty is to pass them down intact to those who will come after us' (Chiva & Levi-Strauss 1992: 170)

This statement by Chiva and Levi-Strauss highlights on the one hand the nature of 'uprooted' objects, whose purpose is to show

history in its duration and continuity, and on the other the role of the museum as the institutional scene of their preservation.

In Japan, historic monuments and museums also exist. However, there has been a different conceptualisation of time there. The past is instead brought up to date in the present – such conceptualisation of time, which I wish to call ‘the logic of actualisation’, seems to underpin the way in which Japan manages its cultural heritage. In order to understand how the logic of actualisation applies to Japanese cultural heritage management, it is helpful to examine what outside observers often consider to be a characteristic of Japanese heritage preservation: the concept of ‘Living National Treasures’ (Aikawa-Faure 2014: 39–44).

The term ‘Living National Treasures’ is used informally to refer to what the Japanese Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties defines as ‘Holders of Important Intangible Cultural Properties’. Although the two terms are often used interchangeably, they actually have different connotations. The legal term does not refer to people – agents, practitioners, or artists – but rather to the arts and crafts themselves as traditions. This is because the purpose of the law is not to honour living artists, but to preserve their crafts or *habitus*, which are intangible. The informal term ‘Living National Treasure’, on the contrary, refers to the artist, the ‘living’ person. The fact that the term ‘Living National Treasure’ is more commonly used in people’s everyday language than ‘Holders of Important Intangible Cultural Properties’ is quite telling: the informal term seems to fit better with the Japanese notion of art and tradition.

Whoever speaks of a Living National Treasure supports the view that tradition does not dwell within finished works, but rather within works in the making. In this sense, practicing traditional art is not aimed at faithfully preserving the heritage of the past, but at bringing what is deemed to have existed in the

past to the present. Seen from this angle, tradition as such can be seen to no longer exist. Even if one concedes that tradition does exist, it is invisible and must be made manifest in order to be recognised. This non-materialistic view of tradition is better represented by theatre than by any other forms of traditional art. When an actor designated as a Living National Treasure performs on stage, tradition is made manifest through his/her individual acting. Tradition does not have any fixed embodiment here – it remains invisible until it is staged, and is made present and visible by and through Living National Treasures. In other words, the traditional becomes *actualised*. Theatrical performance is thus a form of heritage exhibition, achieved through publicly recognised actors and musicians (see also Jackson & Kidd 2011).

This logic of actualisation of tradition also applies to other forms of traditional art in Japan. Bizen pottery is a good example. What characterises Bizen pottery is that it is never glazed; its famous natural beauty makes it a popular choice for the tea ceremony, which promotes simple and unadorned beauty (*wabi*) (Rousmaniere 2007: 158). The pottery producing town of Bizen, which has existed since the 12th-century, is today a flourishing community and industry, with around four hundred potters running their shops next to their kilns. The success of Bizen as a pottery town, however, was not always secure. Bizen pottery went through a long period of stagnation, especially after its production lost the support of the regional authority in Okayama in 1868, caused by the collapse of the Edo political system. According to the brochure published by the Bizen Pottery Traditional and Contemporary Art Museum, Tōyō Kaneshige, son of a long dynasty of ceramists, revived the Bizen tradition and was awarded the title of Living National Treasure in 1956. The Bizen pottery crisis, which had lasted from the late 1860s through to the 1950s,

was resolved thanks to the passion and determination of the individual artist Kaneshige (Rousmaniere 2007: 170). After his death in 1967, however, Bizen found itself without a Living National Treasure, and part of its heritage was lost again. For the next three years, no ceramicist worthy of the title of Living National Treasure emerged in Bizen. In 1970, an artist by the name of Kei Fujiwara was however nominated a Living National Treasure (Rousmaniere 2007: 168), and then in 1987, four years after Fujiwara's death, Tōshū Yamamoto became the next title holder. On each occasion the title of Living National Treasure was conferred it was seen as a crucial event through which heritage is passed on. The history of Bizen pottery is thus represented by Living National Treasures who are believed to embody the Bizen artistic tradition. This tradition is not embodied by the works of art but by the people who produce them. Here one can recognise the logic of actualisation – the past is not transmitted through the conservation of objects, but is maintained, or kept alive, by people.

### **The fate of historic objects and monuments**

Rather than present the past through preserved objects, Living National Treasures enable a continual revival of what existed in the past. According to the logic of actualisation, the conservation of works is secondary to their creators. Nevertheless, some objects and buildings have stood the test of time. How does Japanese cultural policy deal with these?

In much of Europe, history is seen through preserved objects. These objects are visible and, whenever possible, publicly displayed. Indeed, one of the social functions – and responsibilities – of museums is to make the past visible by showing ancient objects. For example, the paintings on display in the Pantheon

show Paris, the eternal city, rescued time and time again from repeated invasions; these paintings symbolically represent Paris as a city stubbornly intent on preserving the past. In fact, Europe appears to me, a Japanese, to be making extraordinary efforts to protect historic objects and monuments from the affronts of time. I am even tempted to assert that the arch-enemy of Europe is not some foreign invader, but time itself.

The situation is quite different in Japan. There are not many surviving historic monuments, largely due to the fact that most traditional architecture is made from wood, which decays relatively quickly. Even more significantly, historic objects are often removed from public view. According to the logic of actualisation, there is no need for objects to act as guarantors of linear history. Even if one wishes to preserve them, this is not made obvious to the public. The example of Shôsôin, an extremely rare historic treasure house originating in the Nara period (710–794), clearly shows the relative lack of interest amongst the Japanese in making historic objects visible. Shôsôin houses about 9,000 artefacts, including objects offered on the occasion of the inauguration of the giant statue of Buddha at Tôdai-ji temple in 752. The Shôsôin treasures remained uncatalogued until the end of the 19th-century, when, in 1892, the Imperial Household Ministry finally took charge of their management (Tokyo kokuritsu hakubutsukan 1973: 380). Today most of the treasures are kept in storerooms, built after the Second World War to ensure the best possible conservation. The public has access to only part of them, and at no other time than during the annual exhibition (for seventeen days) held in the Nara National Museum (Nara National Museum 2014). Therefore, the conservation and exhibition of the treasures occupy two distinct spaces, both physically and symbolically.

The exhibition of the treasures can be compared to an actor walking onto a stage. The treasures are normally invisible, and their secrets are unveiled only when they are performed on stage: that is, when they are on display each year. Such invisibility endows objects with a mysterious aura. In the display, the public discovers highly rare, even exotic items, rather than *historic* objects that have been passed down the generations. Those objects are not there to represent the past, but as reminders that they are still in the present, albeit hidden most of the time. The same logic applies to many historic buildings. In Kyoto, for example, palaces and many temples open only on certain days. This occasional opening reminds people that the monuments are still being used, and even inhabited, in the present day. The public thus discovers a world removed in space from everyday life, and in this special space tradition is actualised – or brought into the present. The admittance of the public to a secret world through an occasional opening is sustained by the logic of actualisation.

Historic buildings are kept away from people's everyday life even more manifestly at the Museum Meiji-mura in Aichi prefecture (Graburn 2008: 229–233). Meiji-mura, on the shores of Lake Iruka, is an open air museum about one million square metres in area. Visitors walk through a small forest before discovering another world, in which the Meiji period (1868–1910) springs back to life. The museum houses over 60 buildings from the Meiji period, all of which have been restored to their original condition. All types of buildings have been re-erected in the village: town halls, banks, hospitals, factories, schools, public baths, a hairdresser's, a church, a cathedral, and even the Kanazawa jail, complete with cells open to visitors. The Shinagawa lighthouse, one of the oldest in Japan, erected in 1870, looks onto Lake Iruka. A little further on, one finds the railway bridge that once crossed

the River Rokugô in Kanagawa. Even buildings used by emigrants have been brought here: for example, a meeting hall from Hilo in Hawaii (1889) and a Japanese emigrant's house from Brazil. Some of the buildings still fulfil their former functions, such as the Ujiyamada Post Office, built in 1909 in Ise, where visitors can mail postcards. In the Kureha-za Theatre, built in 1868, they can watch a performance of Kabuki theatre. The restaurant of the Oi butcher's (1887) serves a beef dish known as *sukiyaki*. A Kyoto tramway and two steam locomotives (one imported from Britain in 1874, the other from the United States in 1912) carry visitors to and fro through the centre of the village.

Meiji-mura is unique inasmuch as all the buildings there were originally built in the Meiji period, a period characterised by modernisation and an opening to the outside world. Almost all of Meiji-mura reconstructions relate to modernity, which was viewed at the time as synonymous with Western civilisation: the hospital, factory, school, railway and so forth. The Meiji government had built the Shinagawa lighthouse as part of an agreement with signatories of the 1858 Treaties of Amity and Commerce. Its building was therefore strongly linked to the opening up of Japan to the West, without which neither the church nor the cathedral could possibly have been built. The policy behind the Museum Meiji-mura also represents changes in daily life: the *sukiyaki* is more than a simple meat dish; it reflects a change in Japanese eating habits, which did not normally include beef in pre-Meiji times. The 'Western style' hairdresser's was another such novelty.

Meiji-mura aims to save Meiji buildings which might otherwise completely disappear; urbanisation has indeed already destroyed many buildings from that period. Meiji-mura is a way of recovering this almost lost time, now materialised on the shores of Lake Iruka. This materialisation of the past in an isolated space sends

the message that the past does not precede the present – it is simply *elsewhere*.

As seen in the above examples, there seems to be a reluctance to represent linear time in Japanese cultural heritage. Arguably, this reluctance stems from the absence of the very concept of linear time in pre-Meiji times, and reflects Japan's embarrassment in the face of modern civilisation during the Meiji period. In the grand project of modernisation, Japan needed to follow the West as bearers of the future, even though this was not a future originally conceived by Japan. Initially it must have felt impossible to establish any continuity between, say, ancient Bizen vases and locomotives imported from the West. And yet, for the ancient Bizen vases to acquire any *historic* value that was worthy of preservation, the Japanese needed to believe that the locomotives were *theirs* – this is because the modern concept of, and desire for, material conservation is predicated on the linear notion of time: from the past, through the present, to the future.

The initial response to the irresistible rise of modernization, and ultimately Westernization, in Meiji Japan was a negation of their past. Many traditional buildings, objects, and customs were abandoned surprisingly rapidly and easily, as exemplified by the nationwide destruction of Buddhist temples and castles in the early Meiji period. When the Japanese subsequently realised that their ancient objects were actually worthy of preservation because of their *historical* value, even though they could not be easily connected to the future envisaged by the ongoing project of modernisation, they started setting them aside and preserving them, just like the Shôsôin treasures which were not publicly displayed until 1940.

The logic of actualisation then offered a solution to the deadlock between tradition and a largely imported modernity. According

to this logic, tradition is no longer part of the past – it exists in the present, in the same way as industrial products. In this sense, the Meiji architecture restored in Meiji-mura – which strives to adapt modern architecture to the environment of a bygone Japan – is for the Japanese a somewhat nostalgic symbol of the attempt at reconciliation of tradition and modernity.

### **The preservation of the present**

Let us now turn to the second undercurrent in Japanese cultural heritage management – the preservation of the present. The phenomenon of preserving the present is not unique to Japan, and is in fact present in many late-modern societies across the globe (Hartog 2005). What we are talking of here is heritage of the past that is so recent that people feel it to be almost a part of the present. Examples of the preservation of the present abound: ‘industrial heritage’ has recently been adopted as a new category of cultural heritage (Douet 2011), and objects and sites of the twentieth century, and even 21st-century, have been increasingly preserved as cultural heritage.

The root cause of the preservation of the present can be found in the loss of traditional ‘sacred centres’, which used to link people with the world of the unknown, a world inhabited by the ancestors and spirits: for example, mountains inhabited by deities, temples, and palaces (Eliade 1969). In many late-modern societies, locations where people can symbolically interact with deities and ancestral spirits have steadily disappeared. In the case of Japan, modernisation starting from the Meiji period has seen the destruction of many Buddhist temples, shrines, castles, and other historic buildings in order to make way for more Westernised structures and places. The loss of these former sacred centres has

given rise to two developments. On the one hand, people's aims and desires become more directed towards 'transitional' places, such as shopping centres and tourist destinations. On the other hand, when people experience such transitional places – which are by definition outside their everyday lives – they start seeing the world to which they return as something external, and moreover they begin to behave in accordance with previously external views and desires. These two developments create an unstable situation in which people feel they are in two places at once – the world they live in and the world they visit. This condition of drifting back and forth between the two worlds can be called 'the doubling of the world' (*sekai no nijû-ka*).

Those who live in famous tourist destinations experience this doubling of the world on a daily basis: the place where they spend their daily lives is at the same time a destination where tourists continuously arrive. A typical example of this in Japan can be found in Shukunegi on Sado Island. Shukunegi was formerly a base for the shipping industry in Japan, and its downtown area still retains a characteristic historical atmosphere. In 1991 the area was nationally designated an Important Preservation District for Groups of Traditional Buildings. The interiors of one section of the buildings in the district are now open to the public. For the purposes of display, the modernised interiors were largely restored to their traditional form. Many people actually continue to live in the area. Certain houses have the highly distinctive shape of the prow of a ship. They are called *sankakuya* (triangle houses) and always feature in tourist guidebooks. An elderly woman living alone in one such house has said, however, 'The word *sankakuya* is made up' (author personal communication) and stressed how constraining it is to live in the preservation district. In fact, people who reside in the preservation district are not even at liberty to renovate

their own dwellings, since they must conform to the regulations imposed by the Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties. For these residents, their own home has at the same time become a transitional location where tourists come and gather. When residents realised that they had no choice but to accept these outsiders for economic reasons, they formulated systems of accepting them; they developed plans for living with the doubling of the world, one example being the production of tourist-oriented folk crafts.

When the doubling of the world becomes very strong, people start having the urge to preserve the present as heritage – that is to say, to preserve the world they live in. The most common form of preserving the present can be observed in the trend to treat incidents or pressing social issues as the subject of preservation and display. For example, immediately after the Great Hanshin Earthquake of 1995, a movement got underway to designate the active fault under Awaji Island, which caused the earthquake, as a natural monument. Three years after the disaster, the national government designated the fault as a natural monument, and the Nojima Fault Preservation Museum was opened on the site of the fault. At the same time, a destroyed house was named the ‘memorial house’ and became an object of preservation. A similar phenomenon was also observed after the devastating tsunami caused by the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake: almost immediately after the devastation, a series of campaigns emerged to preserve damaged structures and other remains as monuments (see Good’s chapter in this book).

Yet, the desire to preserve the present goes beyond historical events such as disasters to include even daily life. An exhibit at the Matsudo Municipal Museum recreates a section of modern urban industrial housing. The subject of the display is the Tokiwadaira Danchi (Apartment), originally built in 1961. From around

the period of the 1960s, large apartment complexes similar to the Tokiwadaira Danchi were constructed across Japan, in both urban areas and rural areas near cities. These apartment complexes transformed not only the Japanese living environment, but the entire Japanese way of life, including culinary customs. This is readily understood by considering the so-called '2DK' type of *danchi* apartment. The term '2DK' designates a standard apartment with two bedrooms, a dining room, and a kitchen. The kitchen is fitted with modern conveniences, a space entirely different from the dark dirt-floor kitchens found in previous Japanese homes. The Matsudo Municipal Museum has recreated a model of the 2DK apartment, with a period refrigerator, television, and Western-style lounge set. Nowadays a refrigerator, television, and washing machine can be found in every home as daily necessities, but in the early 1960s they were together called the 'Three Sacred Treasures', symbolising the modernization of daily life. There is absolutely nothing remarkable about either the 2DK model or the style of life that it has promoted. Based on the standards of previous museums, one would hardly suppose it would become the subject of preservation. People still live at the Tokiwadaira Danchi, and yet part of it has been recreated to show how it used to look in the 1960s.

Museums were already places where oddities and low-value objects were put on display, but today familiar things such as household electric appliances still in use in everyday apartment life have become objects intended for preservation. This trend is emerging at a time when society has lost its traditional sacred centres and starts searching for new centres to be put on display as a self-portrait of the present. This is a narcissistic form of display, born of a desire to preserve the present. At Shukunegi, old buildings are still inhabited and simultaneously used as cultural heritage to be shown to tourists. In the case of Matsudo Municipal Museum, common everyday

elements of the present, or near past, are being turned into a self-expressive form of heritage. Both forms of the preservation of the past were triggered by the doubling of the world – we are increasingly seeing the world we live in as cultural heritage.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have examined two undercurrents in Japanese cultural heritage management: the logic of actualisation and the preservation of the present. The two undercurrents are concerned with different temporal consciousness. One seeks to bring the past up to date in the present and the other seeks to preserve the present as if it were heritage of a distant past. The two undercurrents are also different in terms of whether they are specific to Japan or part of a more global phenomenon. The logic of actualisation is specific to Japan, as it originated from pre-modernisation era Japan and was formed in the course of Japan's desperate effort to reconcile tradition and modernity from the Meiji period onwards. The phenomenon of the preservation of the present, on the other hand, can be observed not only in Japan but also in many other late-modern societies around the World. It is interesting to note that these two contrasting undercurrents co-exist today in Japanese cultural heritage management. This is clearly because of the particular history with which the discourse of heritage preservation emerged in the 19th-century and has since been developing in an ever modernised and globalised Japan.

## Note

This chapter is a revised and expanded version of my article, 'La logique d'actualisation. Le patrimoine et le Japon', published in

the journal *Ethnologie française* in 1995 (<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40989704>).

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