

***Japanese Folk Toys (Kyodo Gangu): New Perspectives on Craftsmanship Models,  
Collectors and Cultural Nostalgia for the 21st Century***

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**Abstract**

This paper aims to analyse the topic of Japanese Folk Toys (JFT) from a multidisciplinary perspective bringing the subject to the 21st century. While considering its previous historiography (S. Shimizu, F. Starr, and J. Kiburz) it will also analyse new aspects and the communities that are involved. While we can observe a crisis in the traditional hereditary craftsmanship model, due to the lack of new/younger artisans eager to continue traditional craft production (considered by some as the expiration date of these pieces) we cannot neglect the appearance of a new type of creators and crafters (notably female) producing these toy pieces; breaking, in an indirect manner, the mould of historically produced, gendered and patriarchal craftsmanship structures, historically reproduced. In parallel, in this new era of JFT there is a renewal regarding the profile of new collectors, as local and global consumers. These groups of enthusiasts of Kyodo Gangu represent today a more diversified community, making the consumption and appreciation more democratic and socially expanded in contrast with the previous more elitist approach to art and crafts collecting of these pieces, with an evident bias towards Orientalist sensitivity. To conclude, this work attempts to question the still persistent narratives of “modernity vs. tradition” that have consistently marked the cultural environment of these pieces (starting in the Meiji era and still present nowadays). The work also includes some illustrations by the author in an attempt to gain a better understanding of the subject, as well as some interviews of creators and collectors.

Keywords: Japanese Folk Toys, Cultural Nostalgia, Craftsmanship Models, Kyodo Gangu, Cultural Studies

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## Introduction

Japanese Folk Toys have recently gained some degree of popularity in western countries, potentially due to the growing circulation of images thereof on social media platforms. The appeal of Japanese material culture for a broad range of aficionados and collectors is not necessarily novel, but aspects of this raise some interesting questions.

Toys have an allure of nostalgia. When we relate them clearly to our own childhood, it seems obvious, but they also have unique features to be appreciated: the design thought process that was put into their creation, the chosen colour palette, their functionality, cultural aesthetics and the handmaking process in the case of more craft-made or artisanal toys.

In the myriad of Japanese Folk Toys or *Kyodo Gangu* as they are usually called, we can name a few such as Darumas from Gunma, Kokeshis from Tohoku, Akabeko from Fukushima, Uma horses from Honshu, and even Maneki Nekos. They have a background of storytelling in their origins, some of them mythical others based in legends close to historical facts.

Found all around the map of Japan and in different materials, shapes and varied symbolic meanings; they retain, and are still used, within the framework of a means of protection from different forms of evil, or as good luck charms. In recent years, their popularity has increased as collectors' pieces among different social and national profiles, in Japan, and more recently, also globally.

There are two words usually used to reference these pieces, *Omocha* and *Gangu*. *Omocha*, is the general definition of toys that became, in some cases, like souvenirs (*Omiyage*) or charms (like some *Omamori*). *Gangu*, refers to the toy as resulting from certain traditional craftsmanship (usually handcrafted) and is also related to aspects of Folklore. Therefore, a more accurate definition of Japanese Folk Toys might be *Kyodo*<sup>1</sup>- *Gangu*, which broadly means, those toys that are part of the folklore (and tradition) of Japan.

This gives us a sense of the broad concept that the idea of “toy” has within *Kyodo Gangu*. There is a fluid notion of what *play* means, and the different meanings of playing or using these toys as collectors' pieces.

Japanese Folk toys have been around since ancient times. Their production became more consistent after the Edo period (1603-1868), during the peaceful, though isolated, period under the Tokugawa shogunates. There are some theories that place the origin of these Folk Toys in China, where the craft industry of toys was flourishing. This ties into many other cultural Chinese influences in ancient Japan, the broader development of craftsmanship and the use of different materials. Indeed, if we observe toys in both mainland China and Japan, we can see some similarities in form, although not in their symbolic values or uses (Kiburtz,1994).

## Brief Historiography From Starr, Shimizu, to Kiburz

The first study about Japanese Folk Toys (JFT) was originated by Shimizu Seifu during the Meiji Era (1868-1912). This illustrated guide was published between 1891 and 1913. It ranks

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<sup>1</sup> *Kyodo* can be interpreted as “the colour of a region” or the Folklore of a place.

as the first and only complete catalogue depicting the different types of Japanese Folk Toys in existence for almost 300 years, and it still constitutes the main reference for toy collectors.

Shimizu illustrated the first three volumes, entitled “Unai no Tomo” (Children’s friends). Consequently, after Shimizu passed away, the work was completed by Nishizawa Tehiko, his friend and assistant, in a similar style of block prints. Every toy was assigned to a specific region, detailing the type of craft involved according to the local availability of materials: wood, bamboo, paper (papier mâché), clay and fabrics.

Both Shimizu Seifu and Nishizawa Tehiko were toy collectors. They were part of a network around Japan, mostly concentrated in Tokyo and Kyoto. These groups of Toy Collectors belonged to an economically stable social sector, a bourgeoisie with access to broad-ranging practices and forms of consuming art. Surprisingly, among them, we find an American professor of Anthropology, Frederick Starr, who wrote the article “Japanese Toys and Toy collectors” in 1926, the first work in English about Japanese Folk Toys, which remains to this day a key reference on the subject.<sup>2</sup>

More recently, the work of Josef Kiburz “*Omocha: Things to Play (or not to Play) With,*” (1994) became, and still is, the most complete and relevant work about Japanese Folk Toys. This author discussed a new classification of Toys and symbolic meanings, compared to those of F. Starr, and from Yanagita Kunio’s work on Folk Tales from 1941. The main contribution from Kiburz was based on the fluidity of the concepts about *play* and *playing* in Japanese society, but also the role of collectors in relation to these toys, as coveted pieces throughout different periods of modern Japanese history.

## Cultural Nostalgia

Observing the historiography of JFT we can detect a general Narrative of Nostalgia around them, that was already present in the first years of the Meiji era, when Shimizu, Nishizawa, or later Starr approached the subject. There have been different waves of discourses of Cultural Nostalgia about these pieces involving their artisan production as part of traditional schemes of craftsmanship in Japan, and their future as pieces that have been evolving from toys to amulets, to souvenirs, and collector’s pieces.

I have divided these Narratives of Cultural Nostalgia into four different historical waves with characteristics that not only reflect the similarities or persistence of the idea of Nostalgia around them but also how other factors such as industrialisation, artisanal production and consumption have evolved along the years.

The idea of Cultural Nostalgia is based on a diagnosis of loss. The Kyodo Gangu has always been the object of narratives of crisis, as something that is about to disappear. The sense of loss also involves angst around the void, being at the edge of seeing traditions disappear. In this case, the concept is applied to the type of production, artisanal, based on traditional craftsmanship.

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<sup>2</sup> Starr was assigned as Professor of Anthropology by William Rainey Harper who founded the University of Chicago with a generous donation from J.D. Rockefeller. He went to Mexico and Congo to conduct some fieldwork before landing in Japan at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, where he would remain until his death in 1933. Henry D. Smith: “Folk Toys and Votive Placards: Frederick Starr and the Ethnography of Collector Networks in Taisho Japan,” from *Popular Imagery as Cultural Heritage: Aesthetical and Art Historical Studies of Visual Culture in Modern Japan*,” Final Report, (PI: KANEDA Chiaki), University of Columbia, March 2012.

The Nostalgic narratives always hark back and praise a better past than what there is at present, or in the future. They blame modernity or other factors, such as Europeanization in this case, as the origins of that loss.

The responses to the different narratives marked the different Nostalgic discourses about Kyodo Gangu.

David Berliner (2014) divides the concept of Nostalgia into two: *Endo Nostalgia*, which refers to personal lived experiences; and *Exo Nostalgia*, which is a narrative about something external, not personal. In both cases, there is the notion of loss. The latter concept appears as the more appropriate to work with these waves of Cultural Nostalgia that are embedded within the modern history of Japanese Folk Toys. This translates into a sense of indignation, anger, pain and sadness. Perhaps, because Kyodo Gangu are related to field of Folklore (as the works of Starr suggested (1926), the idea of nostalgia roams over its history.

### **First Wave of Narrative of Cultural Nostalgia (1890-1920) - Crisis of Industrialisation**

The first wave of narratives of Nostalgia comes with the aforementioned publication by Shimizu Seifu about Kyodo Gangu.

The rise of modernisation also brought the fear of losing traditional methods of production: craftsmanship models based in handmade artisanal work.

The initiative around the development of Unai no Tomo (1891-1923), was based on this sense of loss, followed by the urgent desire to maintain an archive. Shimizu and Nishizawa believed that Industrialisation was endangering the production of these toys; endangering a model of production based on heritage and apprenticeship. The need for a greater workforce in the industrial sector could leave the world of crafts bereft of continuity, of apprenticeships, and thus a fall in the production of Kyodo Gangu, or even their disappearance. It is important to note at this stage that Shimizu was a collector himself.

This sense of loss could have contributed or paved the way to bigger initiatives with similar sensibilities, such as the Mingei movement a few years later.

### **Second Wave of Narrative of Cultural Nostalgia From the Pre-World War (20's-30's) - Searching for National Identity**

In the 1930s there was a general narrative of revalorisation of Traditional Folk stories, that included also the Kyodo Gangu. In search for arguments to strengthen the National Japanese Identity, Cultural appreciation was based on the exceptionalism of Japanese craft production and craftsmanship. The Mingei movement and the main ideas of Yanagi Sōetsu about Japanese folk crafts and the importance of keeping its traditional manual production, considerably influenced this narrative of Cultural Nostalgia towards the end of the 30's. The most notable example being the publication "Japanese Folk Toys" by Tehiki Nishizawa, Shimizu Seifu's collaborator.

The publication was translated and published in English in 1939 by the Japanese Board of Tourist Industry and by the Japanese Government Railways. It is one of many other small volumes conceived to promote travel in Japan. Despite its links to publicity or marketing, Nishizawa's text, which is completed with accurate illustrations of the Folk Toys, comes with

reflexions on the state of artisanal production and, most of all, traditional craftsmanship in Japan.

*“In recent times (...) with the amazing progress in transportation and the free interflow of cultures, the so-called “local colour” within different districts of a country has gradually ceased to be “local”. In other words, the hot bed for the production of folk toys is almost about to disappear. The same fate threatens not only toys but all forms of folk art, local culture. (...) giving rise to the opposition of the hand to the machines, of craftsmanship to wage-earning (...) Such conflicts are the evils of this century. But our civilization moves in that way and there is no way to stop it. Civilization, whether ours or our fathers’, ought inevitably to bring happiness to mankind. There is only one way of comporting ourselves in the face of this crisis, and, that is, for each nation to endeavour to enhance its national and racial consciousness. Folk toys (...) must now be given protection.”*<sup>3</sup>

The main response to this crisis was the growing praise for national treasures, for local tradition, for authenticity. The exceptionalism of the Japanese crafts, here in the figure of the Folk Toys is given by a narrative of “Japaneseness” as the main response to that crisis marked by the perils brought upon by the machine (industrialisation) and a certain process of Europeanization.

In this reaction, quite in tune with the general nationalism of the period, there is also a certain degree of reverted Orientalism (Moeran, 1996) as discussed by Ohashi Ryosuke (2002) and Sonya Ryang (2004). The praise for the exceptionalism of the model of craftsmanship, in this case of these toys, aims to counterbalance its enemy (part of the used language of Nishizawa), embodied as the external cultural forces threatening Japan, exemplified by industrialisation. Exceptionalism as the praise for the exoticism of Japanese craftsmanship itself.<sup>4</sup>

### **Postwar Narratives of the Reconstruction**

During the years following WWII there was a decline in the production and popularity of Japanese Folk Toys. For Japan, the emerging era of Tin Toys symbolised the triumph of the demonised industrialisation process, although with some interesting results in terms of cultural production.

Prior to the war, there was already a small surge in the manufacture of mechanical and electrical toys. This was based on a steady local consumption that would reappear and reach its peak in the 1960’s. In that period, Tin Toys represented 60% of Japan’s export goods.

The decades of 1970 and 1980 will embrace the design of plastic moulds in toy manufacture, which will place Japan as one the world’s principal creators and producers of Toys.

### **Third Wave of Narrative of Cultural Nostalgia - Cultural Heritage (1980-2000)**

With the increase in mechanical, plastic, and electrical toys, some collectors started to go back to older toys, including those from the first era of mechanical toys, and folk toys as well.

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<sup>3</sup> Nishizawa, T.: *idem*.

<sup>4</sup> Yūko Kikuchi analysed this for the case of the Mingei Movement: Kikuchi, Yūko: *Japanese Modernisation and Mingei Theory: Cultural nationalism and Oriental Orientalism*, Routledge, 2004.

A new type of collector appears on scene, with clubs organised around toys. While this phenomenon already existed in the first years of the Meiji era, these new collectors were not exclusively from a bourgeoisie linked to the power of consumption but consisted in more diverse groups with different interests and profiles such as Star or Shimizu.

Collectors at the time wanted to share their collection pieces with the broader public. The Yokohama Toy Club, which was one of the main Toy Clubs at the time, would eventually establish a museum, becoming a forerunner for the subsequent Toy Museums.

In 1974, one collector of Japanese Folk Toys opened his own collection to the public in the town of Himeji. The museum hosts the largest collection of Kyodo Gangu along with other toys from around the world. The director of the Japan Toy Museum at the time of writing, the collector who shared his collection, Mr. Inoue refers to that period and to one of his main motivations to share his pieces:

*“The situation was that the cultural heritage related to children was lost”.<sup>5</sup>*

In this case, the narrative of Nostalgia around Japanese Folk Toys reacted in a different way to previous experiences of fear of loss. The openness and the need to share the toys to keep the craft alive, not as a tradition, but as a knowledge, marks a different and less anxious reaction towards the actual situation of Folk Toys.

#### **Fourth Wave: 21st Century, Narrative of a Crisis (Revised) - Sense of Despair and Uncertainty**

In the last twenty years there have been some changes in the models of consumption and valorisation of Kyodo Gangu. A surge in the Kawaii Culture has helped to rekindle interest in the world of Japanese Folk Toys, with a different gaze and by different consumers. Although these changes have impacted the production as we will discuss below, a discourse of crisis has also appeared around the situation of craftsmanship models.

Craft and craftsmanship models in Japan work with apprenticeships, many of which are structured within the same families. Thus, sons in priority, are given the opportunity to inherit the learning and practice of craft production. Due to economic changes and crisis, many young people decided not to pursue or continue their family craft production, and many youngers who would be candidates to apprenticeships, even outside the family entourage, also decided to pursue other careers in the cities.

The lack of continuity in the formation of apprenticeships and therefore future artisans represents a significant shift in this situation. The narrative of crisis reemerged, once again around the fear of the loss, but now with a greater sense of despair and resignation.

Many collectors of Japanese Folk Toys state that the situation will get worse as artisans grow older and they are unable to continue their work, without the support of assistants or apprentices to guarantee the continuation of Folk Toy production.

In some interviews I have heard this discourse presented as the normative situation. However, the landscape of Gangu has increased in popularity outside Japan and continues to expand.

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<sup>5</sup> See the website of Japan Toy Museum of Himeji. <https://japan-toy-museum.org> Consulted on March 2024.

Although global consumption has been dominated by Chinese collectors, slowly, other consumers have started to collect, reaching out directly to artisans and buying pieces online.

The surge of e-shops that sell Japanese Folk Toys in different forms have created another market for these pieces. The presence of Kyodo Gangu for sell on e-Bay, Etsy, or even MUJI with its lucky cans for new year, and online shops owned by some new artisans proves that the narrative of loss and crisis that is a theme for some collectors has a flip side. While some older collectors keep their pieces as valued commodities and investments, shying away from exhibiting them, as was the case in the 80s; younger consumers of Japanese Folk Toys shake the ground of Cultural Nostalgia.

New models of craftsmanship are also emerging, as is the interest of different artists or designers to pursue a career in craft work. Pop-up markets in Tokyo are a showcase of different artists and artisans who are evolving in the craft of Japanese Folk Toys, revealing the existence of these pieces to a new public. There is new and expanding interest in Kokeshis, Darumas, Akabekos as their consumption outside Japan grows. This is largely due to social media platforms with visual approaches such as Instagram or Pinterest, where new consumers can virtually meet new producers and creatives around the world.

Indeed, if the economic situation shows that younger generations migrate to cities instead of pursuing apprenticeships, there is also another source of artisans, mostly females that with different artistic or craft backgrounds are creating pieces modelled and inspired by Gangu and presenting another take on old and traditional pieces, with new materials, colours, or sizes. Old models of inherited craftsmanship are, in many cases, being reformulated as more females are taking up the practice and craft, taking on apprenticeships.<sup>6</sup>

In sum, a new type of collector is emerging within an increasingly global market for Japanese Folk Toys, which is showing signs of change. Many of these collectors correspond to a more democratic kind of collector, in contrast with the previous, predominantly elitist culture of consumption of pieces of JFT.

## **Conclusions**

There is a wandering spectre haunting the narratives about the world of Japanese Folk Toys or Kyodo Gangu that historically established a certain pessimism towards its future existence. There were in this history, different waves or moments of anxiety, and diagnosis of crisis and a pervading sense of cultural loss.

Nevertheless, while this narrative persists even today, we can now see a wave of change building up. Models of apprenticeships are changing, challenging the previously established gender order (the one that, in many cases, used to prioritise male heirs to female heirs). A new type of collector has emerged with a global access to know, learn, and buy these pieces. This is also facilitating the appearance of new creators of the craft who are bringing new twists to the same models of toys. A new access to Japanese Folk Toys as collectors' pieces by different social sectors that opposes the traditional norm an elitist consumption.

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<sup>6</sup> A recent film "Tsugaru lacquer girl" by Keiko Tsuruoka (2023) demonstrates this case, with the story of a daughter who must fight for her right to continue as the main heir of the craftsmanship lacquer business of her father.

Briefly, there are some clashes between a history of Cultural Nostalgia based on a narrative of angst, crisis, and loss of tradition. A cultural hegemony of the past that, for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, seems to be counterbalanced by new cultural interests from both collectors and creators/apprentices at the same time.

### **Author's Note**

This is a research in progress, thanks for reading. Do not hesitate to contact me if you have comments or suggestions about the subject.



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