

The Organization of Craft Work

Identities, Meanings, and Materiality

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Nostalgia

On encountering the West midway through the nineteenth century, Japan was diverted, reluctantly, from the long-travelled, twisting paths that it had been following into its own interior for centuries. These westernising forces came embodied in the black ships of Commodore Matthew Perry. As well as troops, they were carrying letters from the US government insisting (as was the way with this enthusiastic, upstart nation) that it be allowed to establish trading ports along the Japanese coast. After much procrastination (or so it seemed from a Western point of view) the Shogunate acceded, and the islands changed irrevocably. For one, the political turmoil that ensued overturned the Shogunate and enacted the country of Japan. The destinies of different dynastic prefectures that had historically gathered in little more than loose alignments became braided in increasingly tighter and more intricate patterns. As the ports were established and grew in size and wealth, new political and social structures also emerged in an attempt to administer them. Without any explicit design the islands found themselves acting together.

The form this administration took was, on the surface at least, quiescent: rather than resist trade, the Japanese were collectively undertaking to excel in it. They did, and what began as a gradual and stylistic absorption became, over time, explicit and heavily managed. Denizens of the shogunates were forcibly and even violently converted into a loyal citizen body (*shimin*) (Ivy 1995: 10–11) and a policy of military-backed, aggressive regional expansion sought to secure resources and markets for a growing industrial base organized by an increasingly visible central government. The shameful and deadly failures of some of these centralizing and expansionist policies during WWII seemed only to serve to put the populace on notice to redouble their efforts, ‘encouraged’ yet again by pressure from the USA. The citizens’ zeal for manufacturing seemed endless. They were diligent, industrious and governed by ‘cradle to grave’ career systems characterized by levels of micro-management that would have held Frederick Taylor and Henry Ford in rapturous awe. They also

became eager customers, participating in cycles of ownership, use and disposal with seemingly few qualms about deleterious psychological, social and environmental effects. Western ways had beaten them into a new shape, and they were now beating the West hands down.

Nowhere has the mimetic rush to materialize and commodify life been more pronounced than in the gridded, neon-lit streets of Tokyo; an entire urban setting has become high on lines of production and consumption, a floating world no more. From inside this huge space (there does not seem to be an outside) the change to an entirely commercialized lifestyle seems complete. Like Kafka's story *Metamorphosis*, however, this change is not at all a natural or easy one. The human being has become something very different, at first perhaps a little embarrassed and unsure, but then increasingly aware of how new, powerful movements become possible. Cities like Tokyo are testimony to this affective sense of power. And yet, just as in Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, where Gregor Samsa, despite becoming insect-like, retains and indeed intensifies an anxious concern for his earlier human selfhood, Japan's commercial grab carries remains braided with traditional style. The transforming and then hardening to the rhythm of managed productiveness has been a process of absorption, not wilting exposure. Foreign influence changed the body of Japan into something more physically powerful and agile, yet rather than change completely, this material productiveness and global economic presence has perhaps served to further insulate the nation's traditional and almost unique sense of soul and sentiment. Japan has westernized, but in a Japanese way. It is because of this persisting sense of distinctiveness that Japan has seemed well able to absorb the ironies of its own commitments. Western brands can be obsessed over and brandished joyously, but more as one might fetishize anything exotic: their attractiveness lies in them being 'at a distance', much as the smell of grass meadows remains sufficiently alien to throw a poetising city dweller into bucolic reverie. The same goes for the Western politics of individuality and liberalized markets, or Western dress and entertainments, all of which have been enthused over and adopted in some ways, but always with a twist, and sometimes under an inscrutable gaze.

The impress of the new millennium (a handy, Western epochal marker) has witnessed further change in this complex relationship with itself, as many in Japan have begun to realize their prowess in manufacturing and consuming mass-produced objects does not equate to a meaningful life. A collective anxiety has become palpable. Perhaps chastened by the experience of often heedless commercial development, and certainly now in awe of sublime natural forces, Japanese people are looking to what went before all this economic productiveness. Why did they want to be 'Number 1'? As rapidly and totally as Japan has industrialized, it has also become suspicious of its experience – the sheer pace of development has meant the old ghosts and gods have not had enough time to die, they

linger still in the shadows and ceremonies and subcultures that permeate the digitized and mechanized patterns of thought and action.

There is, amongst some, nostalgia for what lay behind the belching smoke from Perry's iron-clad, US naval vessels beached off Okinawa in 1853. What is imagined is a time when seasonal rhythms and the moon and sun were more apparent, when organized activity, feeling and thought were communally governed, working smoothly, uncomplainingly, and somehow in touch with natural things. Inwardly the nation is being reminded of what has been lost and how their culture might have been different. Nostalgia does this: something is felt to be at stake and a loss has already occurred. The argument goes something like this: what is being lost is the connexion to the 'old ways' by which the country was distinct, unique even (Ivy 1995: 10). The lack of distinctiveness caused anxiety amongst a people who economically were becoming very successful, but only through excelling in practices that were not, fundamentally, felt to be their own. One way of alleviating this anxiety is by nurturing intense affection for substitutes that recreate the past. These recreations are stories and so always beholden to narrative form: they appear only in being continually retold, and are nothing outside of the telling. The passion for craft is one such substitute, and in Japan its stories are being forever told and retold.

Craft and Design

It is an easy association to bring craft alongside cultural and national identity and to find in its exponents a respectful and enhancing embodiment of the old ways. Easy, but in Japan at least, not simple, because in Japan the narratives of craft have so often been kneaded with the imaginaries created in branded design. Take one example amongst so many: the coloured splashes of the Japanese designer and artist Takashi Murakami that float over the fine-grained skins used to make Louis Vuitton bags. Japanese imagination meets Western heritage under the commercially managed imprint of a global design house. The quality of the leather and stitching is of minimal interest; the look governs, and the projection of status predominates. In all this representation the craft seems to get lost. Murakami, a passionate advocate for craft, is playing with the language of design, and perhaps even lamenting its pervasiveness. The gently ironic, cartoon bubbles whose impossibly uniform, bright colour pull the objects they adorn slightly out of place, also keep them there as things to be fetishized. Design concerns the projection of ideas and feelings through representation, whereas craft involves embodied work, which cannot be represented. Craft, then, is practice in which what is being done and made constitutes its own purposive structure, without need for an elaborate representational 'superstructure'. It is quieter than design, looser in conscious direction, and perhaps less in thrall to the idea

of being distinct and noticeable. Craft is about things, whereas design is about objectified things, or objects.

For David Pye, this difference between design and craft constitutes a form of hierarchy: designers could never specify a certain material or form, or elaborate on an idea, without craftwork having first laid the groundwork and experimented with available possibilities. This groundwork seems to require a form of connexion back to nature. Craft accentuates this awareness of nature by revealing its essence. It is not the natural material itself, but the skilfully worked material, the wood that has been nurtured, sawn, dried, planed, sanded, oiled and then worked and worked into something rare, revealed and accentuated. Form is similarly an attentive accentuation of what is found, yielding lines, planes and volumes of light and dark that pull maker and user alike into an entire world.

In coupling history and nature within itself craft gives voice to an inherent rather than consciously designed sense of truth and beauty. It is not something about which people can agree using rational arguments; rather, they accede respectfully and expertly. It is not as if, says Pye (1968/2002: 18), thingly materials or forms exist in their own right. You do not just find useable clay, lacquer, metal ore or wood: those who work with them must bring out the promise that lies latent in such materials. Nor is form to be found in templates, dies, patterns and stamps, for these too are formed by attending to the materials' qualities. Craft is the working and forming of things from out of the possibilities thrown up by materials. It is work in which the outcome is under constant risk, depending as it does on the judgment, care and dexterity of the worker. Contrary to mass production and machine manufacture, craft preserves and works with the possibility of failure, and it is in this dark space that a sense of human complicity and responsibility for what becomes a distinct and distinctive thing takes root. In short, craft craves and needs risk, whereas design can and often does reach for certainty (Popp & Holt 2016; Pye 1968/2002: 20–21). Murakami's Louis Vuitton bags have both, but the craft is managed into near non-existence by processes of quality control and financial accounting, or it becomes a represented object thrown onto the busy, noisy surfaces of a marketing campaign.

The craft for which the Japanese are developing a nostalgia is more that of risk than design; the pre-industrialized exposure to material form and purposive structures to which the skill of the worker must be brought under the impress of lengthy apprenticeships, habituated generational expectations and rigorously embodied ceremony. These processes of training in making and use ameliorate but never eliminate the risk, for without uncertainty what is created has no life of its own, and it is in the encounter with and maintenance of such a distinction that craft generates its peculiar hold. To be things of craft the pots, knives, umbrellas, theatrical performances or food are created with the possibility that they could have

been otherwise. In this they are quietly unique, albeit often in very ordinary ways. This goes for all craft, irrespective of its place. In Japan, however, the capacity to imagine the ways of the past by absorbing and creating with risk seems to be gathered as a ritualistic riposte to its commercialization that few other cultures seem to match in its intensity. Moreover, whilst in the wake of the Western Renaissance civilization was equated with the separation of the social and the natural, and the human from the animal, the Japanese world view has never really worked on pushing such anthropological divisions. An electricity pylon is much like a tree, and eagles will perch on both under a common sky. This further leaves the country prone to, and animated by, the narratives afforded by craft.

For some exponents of Japanese craft, it is a process of imagining oneself back into the past, and into nature, in order, then, to act anew: a looking back into what is lost in order then to project forward. Here is one of its most persuasive exponents, Junichorō Tanizaki (1933/1991: 9):

Had we invented the phonograph and the radio, how much more faithfully they would reproduce the special character of our voices and our music. Japanese music is above all a music of reticence, of atmosphere. When recorded, or amplified by a loudspeaker, the greater part of its charm is lost. In conversation, too, we prefer the soft voice, the understatement. Most important of all are the pauses. Yet the phonograph and radio render these moments of silence utterly lifeless. And so we distort the arts themselves to curry favour for them with the machines. These machines are the inventions of Westerners, and are, as we might expect, well suited to the Western arts. But precisely on this account they put our own arts at a great disadvantage.

And as for amplification, so for paper, photography, toilets, eating implements, glass making and candlelight. The lost Japan for which Tanizaki feels almost constant pangs of nostalgia is one of mellowness and opaque mystery whose inscrutable character is given heft by pensive acceptance of life's patinas. In contrast, presumably, the Westerner is a bellicose, assertive, logocentric, neophilic wanting only distinction. Leaving aside the quaint racism, and accepting that Tanizaki was writing at a time when Japan had yet to fully display its own vicious brand of assertiveness by laying waste to vast stretches of China (1937), or entering WWII with attacks on the United States, Singapore and Malaya (1941–1942), there is something to be learned from Tanizaki's affections for the quiescent, sober and sensitive forms of crafting around which Japanese character might be purposively ordered.

Take a traditional house. Its palely coloured walls are made with softening paper (*shōji*), dried clay and richly grained woods that absorb and gather a light so indirect as to be stripped of its luminosity. The floors are strewn with mats of woven straw (*tatami*) whose gently astringent

smell and firm yield underfoot announce themselves as equals to any human presence. The alcove (*tokonoma*) holds a vase, stem and scroll whose pale union yields utterly to their paler burnished surrounds. The eating areas are alive with pots glazed in mannered imperfection stacked neatly next to lacquerware bowls painted in liquid darkness that comes to life in the occasional flicker of an oil lamp. And the eaves cast shadows over a balcony as a peony made heavy by late spring rain might hang over neatly tended grass.

The craft involved in making these homely things is as apparent as the things themselves and it appears in use, not representation. The mats, walls and bowls are created for everyday life, throwing themselves into the thrown condition in which the Japanese people live out their day-to-day lives – mats for sitting, walls for privacy and bowls for eating. Here all is as it is, and the craft remains equipment to be used thoughtlessly and instrumentally. Yet Tanizaki's nostalgia evokes something more grounded than these things being just well-made tools for use. There is an attention to style and disposition that extends way beyond the presence of things. Indeed what is there physically is of far less importance than the relations that are thereby sustained, so long as the things are made well. The traditional house is made the way it is to live with its surroundings: this is how it becomes a whole, as do those who come and go across its threshold. The threshold is itself a space, and is often extended in repetition through porches, so that the distinction between inside and outside becomes vague, the one giving onto the other in muted contact rather than occluding separation, the affect being one of the transience rather than presence.



Figure 1.1 Temple

Many traditional buildings in Japan share this avoidance of solid distinction, giving voice to an impermanence and intangibility that Tanazaki (1933/1991: 46) finds evoked beautifully in a traditional song of the countryside: ‘the brushwood we gather stack it together, it makes a hut; pull it apart, a field once more’. The song line acknowledges the impermanence of all things and yet celebrates the human capacity for making that is integral to their preservation. Buildings fall into nature and occupants into the building and the entwinement gives voice to a rootedness and connectivity in which any sense of a subject manipulating objects to serve preconceived interests becomes as faint as the wisps of mist that evaporate in morning sun. The risk comes in allowing nature into the house whose apparent simplicity has very little to do with the stripped-back, tidy and efficient designs favoured by Western rationalism and its obsession with the new. Where in the West simplicity can embody a turning away from nature and history and towards designs organized according to efficient principles of doing more with less, there is in Tanizaki’s ideas of simplicity an exposure to the variety and subtlety of nature that can be brought forth in sustained attention to being with things.

Kenya Hara argues it is the capacity of Japanese craft to sustain these risky relationships that lend it distinction. These relations are embodied ones, and attain a richness and density of expression when they are unspoken. The representing word is overwhelmed by a historically embalmed slew of symbolic associations to which the entire expressive body of the Japanese is devoted. By way of example, Hara (2015a) talks of the *komainu* that stand in the doorway of Shinto shrines, a pair of dogs whose facial expressions show an open-mouthed exhaling (*Ah*) on the right and a closed inhaling in the left (*Un*). As a basic pairing they are emblematic of the unspoken breathing in which the body touches the immaterial, the unspoken giving and receiving of understanding by which spirit moves through the world, and through the body that in receiving also gives forth. Hara (2015a: 16) talks of its being an immediate, sometimes overwhelming and entirely relational way of understanding, but also one open to surprise, so at one and the same time there is clarity and opacity, directness and indirectness, the settlements of the known and thrill of the unknown. The *komainu* symbolize unspoken direct communion on the one hand, and anticipation of the unknown on the other, showing understanding itself to be a threshold process in which the expected and unexpected meet.

This meeting of the unexpected, however, is hard won. One cannot simply breathe in and out, one has to learn, be apprenticed, and the apprenticeships in Japanese craft are arduous, especially if the narrative of craft remains steeped in an enervating ‘respect’ for the old ways. The apprenticeships are long and apparently pointless, and the right to become an acknowledged master is hard earned; nothing comes without discipline. There can be a deep conservatism here, especially in

those practices which put a premium on the security of tradition and which find that rituals and formalities constitute their own meaning, freed from the expressive and hence risky influence of active and experimental users.

Often (and certainly for Tanizaki) the intricacies of such craft are deemed impenetrable to outsiders, especially foreigners, who are often seen as incapable of appreciating the mysteries of such a refined and subtle indigenous culture. Thus, nostalgia can induce a quiet and depleting xenophobia in which the making and using of things can only end in hollowed-out, ossified performative expressions as bloodless as the white masks and makeup of *kabuki* theatre. If craft is to connect its makers and users to what lies beyond them, it necessarily touches what is other to itself, and things carry vividness only insofar as their presence touches what they are not, and against which they might maintain their distinction. All forms of craft make things in relation to what is deeply familiar and therefore also foreign. They can do so with joy and so increase the affective capacity in the relational cycles of making and using. Or they can do so in sadness, denuding the capacity to feel until it shrivels into a pastiche of its own aspiration. This is also an aspect of the risk of which Pye speaks.

So, to risk a brief summary, we have suggested that if craft involves the presence of risk, then in Japan this is constituted in: acknowledging the fleeting impermanence of things, in the creation of relations between the human maker and user that extend into a wider exposure to nature and history, and finally in submission to disciplinary regimes of training that demand apprentices loosen themselves from a sense of individual pre-eminence. In all three aspects there is an association of mastery with humility and experiment, one that is both encouraged but also imperilled by the nostalgic call for the impossible restoration of lost tradition.

Sushi

It is to these aspects of Japanese craft (the fleeting, relationality, discipline) that we bring *o-sushi* or sushi. Sushi is the serving of raw fish on a softly packed ball of slightly salted, vinegared rice. The rice has to be warm and it is renewed constantly as it becomes cold. When sushi is served it must be in the perfect condition. Variants on this basic form include the use of vegetables, fried tofu, and omelette. *Nori maki* has become the main variant of this basic form, in which the rice, fish and other ingredients are themselves wrapped in sheets of pressed seaweed. The fish is raw but also worked on, sometimes quite extensively. For example, Tokyo-style, *Edomae* sushi involves 'work' that is done to the ingredients, e.g., salting fish to extract moisture, adding *umami* by lining it on top of dried kelp and sometimes fermenting fish to soften the texture and condense the

flavour. Plain fresh fish is not considered a good match with the rice. In fact, for *Edomae-zushi*, the rice is said to be the main protagonist and fish is worked on to match the rice. Other styles involve less mediation, but there is always marinating, mixing, pickling and steeping involved somewhere. Once made and presented, the traditional way of eating sushi is to hold sushi directly with the fingers, not chopsticks.

For contemporary Japanese, the word ‘sushi’ implies a scale of provision and experience: at one end we have traditional sushi bars and the other mechanized, conveyor belt sushi. Traditionally there was a sushi place in each neighbourhood. Most of them were reasonably priced although sushi was always considered to be the food for special occasions. These mid-range sushi bars have now largely disappeared. In their place have come chains and franchises running conveyor belt sushi restaurants. Their convenience and lower price make them increasingly popular, with many offering two pieces of sushi for JPY100. Most of these companies have factories in China where globally sourced fish are mechanically prepared, packaged and shipped. Employees in the sushi bar simply open the vacuum-packaged fish and put them on top of robot-made rice. In addition to changing the way sushi is prepared, these companies are also innovating with new kinds of sushi, involving cheese, meats, roasts and even fried potatoes.

The traditional sushi bars maintain a sense of distance from such brash commercialization, and it is here that the word craft might still apply. For ‘craft’ read ‘cost,’ with a typical visit costing between JPY20,000 and

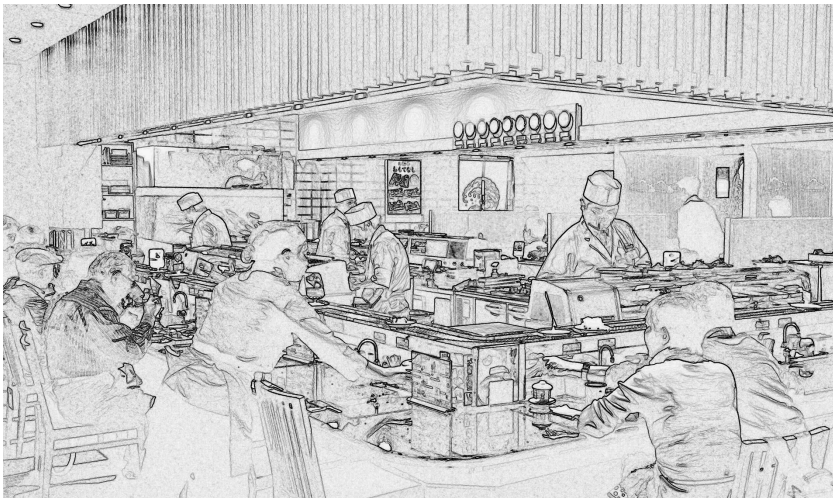


Figure 1.2 Conveyor Belt with Sushi

JPY40,000 per person. Though traditional in form, many bars are new, and like their conveyor belt brethren are becoming popular. Some offer wine to match sushi and others combine sushi with *kaiseki*, which is a menu-based, meal-style cooking. Many magazines and books write features on these sushi bars, further feeding an ever-present discourse around sushi. Though polar opposites in the manner of preparation and eating, even the most efficient and cheap mass-produced sushi still shares in and relies on this discourse. Customers use the traditional sushi and the whole sushi culture as a reference point in talking about and experiencing this popularized version. For example, when people say to others, “I had sushi for lunch today,” they do not forget to add, “It was the rotating one, though”, as if at some other juncture they would be trying the more traditional, pricier version.

Although categorially sushi is associated with restaurants and as a style of cuisine, at least in the traditional places it is considered to be a distinct craft. Sushi chefs are called *shokunin*, the same word used for a craftsman of other kinds. They are said to apprentice, *shugyo*, with a master, *oyakata*. In this they contrast with kinds of chef in Japan, for example chefs practising the Kyoto-style cuisine called *kaiseki*, which consists of ten or more dishes of a variety of ingredients, preparation techniques and plates. These chefs are called *ryorinin* and are much closer to the image of Western-style chefs. In contrast, sushi *shokunin* focus on an apparently simple, stripped-back form of trade in which skill comes through the repetition of making and eating relatively standard forms of food using long-established techniques and ingredients.

The Fleeting

In sushi what is made is made to disappear, at least to be physically reconstituted at the very moment of its coming to fruition. It comes and then goes in a brief but somehow beguiling life: it is made to die and be remade in cycles of learned and disciplined expression by which the dispositions, values and styles of a culture become sedimented and channelled into something almost archaic. The customer is to eat the piece of sushi in one bite; biting it in half or leaving some is not acceptable, and it is to be eaten within seconds after the chef serves it in front of them.

This is because sushi is most perfect at the time of making and then quickly gets dry. Similarly, the rice is packed softly so that air remains between grains of rice. If the sushi is left too long, the rice is pressed down by the fish on top of it and loses the sense of lightness imparted by the *shokunin*. The rice, as Roland Barthes (1970/1982: 12) notices “can be defined only by a contradiction of substance; it is at once cohesive and detachable; its substantial destination is the fragment, the clump, the volatile conglomerate”.

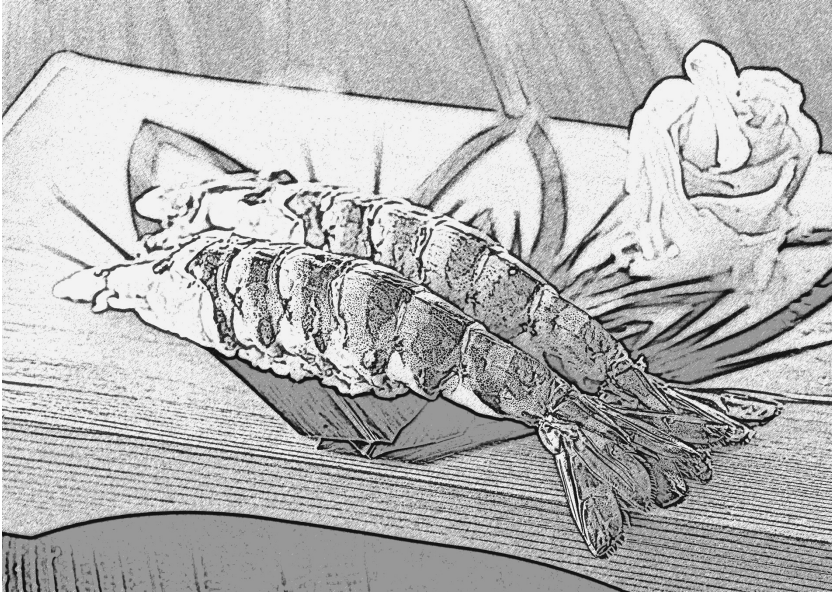


Figure 1.3 Sushi

The smell too is an important consideration in the craft. Customers are told not to use perfume, which would contaminate the subtle aromas of sushi that the *shokunin* attempts to gather at the moment of making. The temporary nature of the things is palpable: the smells are elusive, the lifting of the rice little more than a pause, the lucent pull of the sliced fish is caught in a glimpse. The sushi is there and then not there, in one mouthful it is present and absent. Customers are therefore given only a short moment to savour it. Their discipline comes in a respect for what is offered to them, fleetingly, and for what allows itself to be prepared, carefully. Both those preparing and eating the food are themselves plaited with a temporal experience of confronting and being complicit with the demise of what has been painstakingly created, which is treated as a living thing, receptive to its climate and carrying its own subtleties, and even surprises. Because the piece of sushi is ‘alive’, its taste cannot be entirely controlled, there is space enough for nature to do its own work.

Just as the form that each piece of sushi takes carries with it its own demise, so the presence of the *shokunin* too is minimal. He (it is nearly always a ‘he’) brings the rice, seaweed and fish into a culinary coherence that reveals his sensitivity to the tastes and aesthetic form inherent in the ingredients. The *shokunin* does not impose this form

upon the ingredients but lets it emerge, according to the nature of what is before him, which he then works on. In some ways it is akin to what Hara (2015b) calls ‘ex-forming’, the pulling away of any explicit, known design in order to let what is not known, and hence risky, come through. In this way the fish, crab or prawn evoke the forms they took when alive, the rice grains remain together yet distinct enough to be their comestible themselves. So the skill of preparing comes in emptying out any aggrandizing individuality: the *shokunin* learn to attend to and reveal the forms they discover latent within the ingredients, forms whose latticework can be shared by the calligrapher and dancer. This is also why the sushi bar is always plain and lit without distracting lights. It is made of white cypress wood. Like the wood in many traditional buildings it serves a functional, social and symbolic purpose. It is not easy to find an immaculate cypress that is long enough to span the long counter in one piece. There is no decoration, only the plain wood, its pale grain giving itself as a backdrop to the carefully made pieces of fish, rice and vegetable. The food itself carries an inscrutable depth and suggestiveness that is denuded by decoration and excessive colour. The sushi is there because it allows itself to be there. The presence of the expert is minimal, and this is his expertise.

The same minimalism goes for the equipment and the preparation, serving and eating space. The kitchen behind the bar can get quickly cluttered if not attended to continually. The *shokunin* constantly cleans the cutting board and knives. Knives can easily get stained and need to be wiped and dried constantly, and are constantly being sharpened and polished with a stone that gradually reduces them to invisibility. The knife is the dominating implement, indeed really the only one when it comes to preparation: the minimalist space reflects a minimalist style of cooking. In being cut, rolled and pressed, but not heated, sushi sits between the raw (nature) and the cooked (culture) in an equivocal way. Those of us weaned on these distinctions so painstakingly distilled from the cultural myths analysed by ur-structuralist Claude Lévi-Strauss ought to be able to place food on this symbolic scale of cultural sophistication. Sushi gives the lie to this imperialist science. In being rigorously formed and eaten with disciplinary awareness, pieces of sushi lean towards being ‘cultural’. The aesthetic attentiveness to detail and quality means that what began as simple street food can now exemplify the height of civilized sophistication. According to Tanizaki: “It has been said of Japanese food that it is a cuisine to be looked at rather than eaten. I would go further and say that it is to be meditated upon”. To look upon the food is to sense the refinement in skill and manners by which it has been realized. Yet at the same time, because it is considered ‘alive’, sushi is also related to as a very natural thing, untainted by the overbearing attentions of conscious human design.

In meditating upon a piece of sushi (but not for long), the uncultured qualities of nature (the raw) are also experienced. Here sushi gives off nothing other than what is found in nature, its life, which is given over in democratic fragmentation, one piece amongst many, like souls – without hierarchy, *Ah-Un*.

Relational

The space for eating sushi matters not simply for the preparation and eating of the food but because it is where the customers and *shokunin* form a gathering. It is typically a small, frugal-looking space. People sit and lean at the bar, gossip and share everyday news. The chef is part of curating the conversation as well as preparing the creation of food. In this, sushi becomes almost an essential form of craft, coming as it does as an entire ensemble of minutely managed moments, some ceremonial and entirely emptied of any obvious purpose, but all of which cohere into cycles of conversational, culinary and ritualistic exchange.

Before and after the making and eating, apprentices attend to preparing and serving areas, cleaning up and sweeping the floor and getting to know the space itself, its rhythms and how interactions occur. The space is integral to the cooking. There is little hiding away, just cycles of training, preparation, serving, eating and engaging. In a French kitchen, for example, you wait for the magic to appear from hidden depths, whereas sushi is about the open and clear present unfolding in public,



Figure 1.4 Sushi Bar

where what is made is, almost uniquely in the context of craft, done in the very same moments of its being used.

As well as the bars allowing people to relate to one another, sushi itself places humans in relation to nature. Seasonal fluctuations, for example, are very apparent: indeed, the small bar might be said to be an entire world of shifting climatic patterns. Even when fish can be caught in a wider time frame, there is a limited time during which each fish is particularly tasty, often to do with how much fat has been accumulated. The Japanese fetishize firstlings; they desire the foremost, the earliest: bonitos in April, young spotted shads in July, and crabs in November. Prices soar for these nascent rarities. The location from which fish come from is another topic often discussed at sushi bars. Tuna from *Oma* in the northern part of Japan is considered best. So are mackerel from Oita, arch shells (*Akagai*) from Yuriage, and Japanese cockles (*Torigai*) from Kyoto. So, whilst the sushi bar is closed off from the street, it remains intimate with broader patterns of natural and economic change – customers and chefs are intimately aware of how animals and plants emerge from seasonal shifts, and respect them for being such. The universal availability of food has not as yet been imported into the sushi bar, at least not into those espousing a level of craft, which move sympathetically with the seasons, and also sensitively with the market.

Just as sushi touches wider nature, so it also forms a bond between the rural and urban, and across all classes of people. Here is Tanazaki again, commenting on the preparation of sushi:

I learned of the dish from a friend who had been to Yoshino and found it so exceptionally good that he took the trouble to learn how to make it – but if you have the persimmon leaves and salted salmon it can be made anywhere. You need only remember to keep out every trace of moisture, and to cool the rice completely. I made some myself, and it was very good indeed. The oil of the salmon and the slight hint of salt give just the proper touch of seasoning to the rice, and the salmon becomes as soft as if it were fresh – the flavour is indescribable, and far better than the sushi one gets in Tokyo. I have become so fond of it that I ate almost nothing else this summer. What impressed me, however, was that this superb method of preparing salted salmon was the invention of poor mountain people. Yet a sampling of the various regional cuisines suggests that in our day country people have far more discriminating palates than city people, and that in this respect they enjoy luxuries we cannot begin to imagine.

The cities are now more porous to rural influence than when Tanazaki was writing, and the rural definitely more exposed to urban encroachment, and both are exposed to international styles. These porous boundaries expose sushi to the risk of dilution to cater for foreign tastes, but

on the plus side to experimental developments that can only come by remaining in touch with what lies beyond its treasured orthodoxy.

Discipline

There is obvious discipline in the preparation of sushi, and given the length and repetitive nature of the apprenticeships in cleaning the bar and preparing the food some might say the repetition is somewhat gratuitous. The chefs embody a neat filigree of technique that demands extreme attentiveness. They have spent years here, and during the early years they barely get to touch the food, spending more time with a sweeping brush and detergents than with chopping boards and ingredients. As apprentices they learn by endlessly preparing the rice, each iteration constituting nothing more than the difference of its being the next in a long sequence through which conscious rule-following becomes thoughtless expertise, then it's the eggs for the omelettes, then the rolling of seaweed. Again and again.

It is easy to trace the lineage of the master-apprentice relations by which a *shokunin* comes into being; some have more than one master in their career and, in turn, top *shokunin* can be responsible for producing a large cohort of successful disciples. In following the master, some will inherit the name of the master's business as a whole, or in part. It is rare that *shokunin* open multiple sushi bars at the same time. Most of them have one place, and it is they who do the making. So, unlike other restaurants, it is also rare that the master chef is absent and thus just a brand. As in most crafts, the touch of the maker matters, it carries an aura, and the maker presides over the creation of the whole thing. There is no sense in which the *shokunin's* skill will fit with the wider divisions of labour and specialization prevalent in the production of conveyor-belt sushi. Customers expect to see the chef *in situ* doing the making whenever they visit. When they have to travel, they shut up shop and take a financial hit. Their reputation is what matters, and their physical presence is integral to that.

And that presence is often exhausting. A critical part of the *shokunin's* work is to procure fish in the central market, *Tsukiji*. They wake typically at 5 a.m. and visit the market every day. They do this after keeping the bar open until late at night. If they do not make themselves present in the market, they lose credibility among the fish-brokers who auction off fish specifically for certain *shokunin*, and do so on the basis of long-established, trusting relationships and knowing the kind of fish that is preferred. If the relationship is a strong one, the broker will bend over backwards to get the necessary fish, even at high prices, meaning any profit for him is minimal or even negative. In the end, the quality and the relationship will endure hand in hand, with broker and *shokunin* each looking to the other.

As well as requiring the devotion of most waking hours, the discipline also tends toward the conservative. Like many other craftspeople, sushi chefs do not do bricolage all that well; indeed, it is often deemed *déclassé*. Using available materials to improvise something that works is just not good enough. From the beginning to the end, they have a duty to perfect the process. If they have not procured the fish of the quality they demand of themselves, they do not offer it to customers. The same goes for all other ingredients. The types or forms of sushi are also typically the same year on year, season on season, week on week.

Slight modifications, however, are allowed, even encouraged. *Shokunin* will modify the preparation techniques for each fish, for example, by plunging the fish in vinegar a few seconds longer or altering the way they slice the fish block and pack rice, depending on the customer, whom they constantly observe during each visit and over multiple visits. And customers tend to be loyal habitués of one establishment, and are also typically disciplined in behaving in the right way and developing a knowledgeable relationship with what they are eating. It is not uncommon for *shokunin* to test customers, especially newer ones, by posing a difficult question and observing how the customer responds. For instance, as soon as a customer is seated, a *shokunin* might ask them what they would like to drink. This is done before explaining what is available. Some say that beer is not the right drink for sushi because it does not go well with raw fish. While many people prefer sake, some say that sake is made of rice and conflicts with the rice in sushi. A few people recommend eating sushi with green tea. There is nothing hard and fast about any of this, deliberately so, because then it becomes a matter of judgment, which implies involvement, knowledge and hence, also, ignorance.

Because in *okonomi* – as you like – style there is no written menu provided, customers are required to know what fish would be appropriate to order in which order. There is often heated debate as to the order of sushi one should pick. People seem to agree that they should begin with leaner fish like red snapper and flounder, move to strong-flavoured fish like tuna and mackerel, and end with rolls and then with sweet sushi like sea eel and omelette. Some sushi bars have a glass case in front of the customers so they can look. Still, it is not easy to determine the name of the fish by looking at it and many sushi bars store fish in wooden cases. Customers then need to know what fish is in season. Customers are not supposed to ask for help either. A typical ‘joke’ goes like this: When a customer asks, “What do you recommend?” the chef replies, “We don’t have anything that we don’t recommend”, or more tersely “There is no recommendation. Please let me know what you want”. Newer and less experienced customers might hesitate, perhaps aware they are being tested, but unsure how. More generally, there is a public image that sushi bars, notably traditional ones, are scary places to visit and *shokunin* are often said to be tetchy. Given the customers are not

informed of the prices of each piece of sushi and are only given the bill after completing the meal, this reputation is in many ways well grounded: novices have to force themselves to learn and it is not made easy for them. Customers should gain experience of the craft in order to become proper customers. The expertise extends from acquiring the manners and rituals to developing the palate to discern differences in flavour. So, in consumption as well as production, comes a care for the right combinations and their order, a deliberate and disciplined eschewal of considering cost, and a willingness to experience the risk of getting it wrong.

Three Aspects as One

This emphasis on consuming correctly shows the interconnected nature of the three aspects of craft: it is nigh on impossible to isolate one, or to ascribe dominance to it. Demanding appreciation from those eating the food and partaking of the ritual establishes rings of increasing exclusivity into which customers attempt to place themselves, the inner circle being that which is deemed most intensely appreciative of and sensitive to the subtleties and niceties of the ephemeral, risky thing being placed before them. The sense that there are different customer circles also leaves space for myths to perpetuate, such as the *shokunin* allegedly using discretion to alter prices from customer to customer depending on their disciplinary skill and familiarity. Customers who eat constitute the craft of sushi as readily as the *shokunin*, though always in a position of subservience. Some customers actually consider themselves as apprentices to a sushi master. They try to frequent a particular sushi bar so that they taste the subtle difference from month to month as well as can gain the trust of the master. In becoming experts, they can also develop increasingly uneasy feelings about novice customers who almost inevitably behave inappropriately. A kind of snobbery begins to creep in as those customers who cannot bring the craft of sushi to fruition become an annoyance for those who are 'at one' with it.

And so, one wonders what these loyal, long-standing customers might make of a new and sizable group of relatively young customers calling themselves *Sushi Otaku* or 'sushi geeks'. The word *otaku*, which started in Japanese comics and animation, is often negatively perceived, and they have adopted the term somewhat ironically. Being passionate about sushi, these newer customers actively develop their taste by acquiring multiple experiences and discussing their taste with peers. There is no sense of them being from an elite, and their style and skill breaks the standard structural reading of taste offered by the likes of Bourdieu (1997). Of course, many customers of traditional sushi bars are from conservative and often elite strata of society, yet these new *otaku's* taste is equally if not more refined, and their background can be from anywhere; they

do not exhibit a transposable *habitus*, and instead have converted the tradition of sushi into an amateur subculture entirely devoted to craft (Hennion 2007a; 2007b). They have confidence in their taste for and knowledge of sushi, they have eaten sushi more than anybody else and have the most distinguished palate of nearly any customer, but at the same time depreciate themselves and refuse to be associated with wider social and cultural categorizations

Here sushi is being used as much as a compensation for being uprooted from the culture and tradition as a nostalgic enforcer. There is no attempt to recover loss (whilst still keeping hold of the sense of loss). Rather, sushi expertise becomes a mobile signifier of self-reliance, a symbolic condition of sophistication being used by those forced to compete and develop their own identifies (Boltanski & Chiapello 2005). There is anxiety here still, but it comes from a lack of felt connexion to the old ways. In this, these *sushi otaku* embody a threat to the stratified veneration of traditional crafts, and by extension to the elites who sustain such orthodoxy. For example, one writer associated with upper-class gourmets and close to a well-known author, Shotaro Ikenami, who was also known as a gourmet, has accused them of being addicted to information about sushi gleaned from the internet rather than being real sushi customers (Shigekane 2009: 228–229). This new class is hard to deal with. They seem to have absented themselves from society and history in a similar manner to the long-venerated timeless folk (*minzoku*) of myth who preserve the essence of Japan against the onslaught of global capitalism (Ivy 1995: 18), yet they have precisely the reverse effect, appropriating a craft in such a way as to abide in their own self-willed atmosphere. Rather than use the nostalgia for craft to resist and absorb the modern, these *sushi otaku* are its upshot, and here the affect of craft is not to linger with the old ways, but to suggest new ones. And some *shokunin* are taking note, acknowledging that these *sushi otaku* are acquiring a discipline and fine taste from which might emerge sources of innovative play. Newer *shokunin* are creating sophisticated sushi that matches *sushi otaku*'s taste; for instance, the newer style sushi is typically smaller in size and lighter in taste than traditional sushi, which sometimes could be rough, expressing the old, stubborn *shokunin*'s own strong taste.

Back to Nostalgia

Our foray into sushi finds craft a delightfully elusive phenomenon. What we have hazarded as the defining qualities of Japanese craft are all faithfully reproduced in sushi. There is care for social relations in the gathering force of which fish-brokers, master chefs, apprentices, customers and critics are configured as a commons shared by generations before them. Nature too is made very apparent, with many sushi bars being run to

the structure of seasonal almanacs of what to eat when, why and how. There is also the discipline necessary not only to make things well and uniquely and absorb the risk of them failing, but also to consume them appropriately. It is not only makers who must learn. And finally, there is the mannered acceptance of and even delight in the evanescent: whatever approaches perfectibility also touches on its own dissolution, and in small pieces of sushi such harmonic intimacy between form and its dissolution finds a beguiling expression.

Yet considering sushi as craft has also thrown up some interesting anomalies. Its rejuvenation has been very much a function of growing popularity amongst newer customers, including internationally, seduced by marketing and the branding of fast food versions: the conscious manipulation of an idea has led them into a practice that consciously resists such representations. So, far from being antithetical to its craft, in the case of sushi large-scale mechanization has been its midwife. This widening of the customer base has also disturbed the traditional alliance between the appreciation of craft and a long-standing cultural elite, certainly in Japan. By becoming passionate about the food, and dedicated to learning more, a subculture has emerged that has used the tradition as a resource to articulate a form of cultural confidence and independence; conservatism is being used against itself to enchant an otherwise obedient life (Suddaby et al. 2017). For the *Sushi Otaku* the disciplined, relational and intangible aspects of craft become the medium in which an emancipatory force might be realized, albeit one steeped in consumption. Their aesthetic and culinary performance disturbs the standard narratives afforded by craft insofar as a nostalgic sense of loss is subsumed by an excitement for raw aesthetic, culinary and social gain.

We began the chapter suggesting craft can be understood as a peculiarly effective narrative whose affective force is carried by nostalgia for a lost past. Craft absorbs and in turn feeds the experiences of longing. Craft, so the narrative is told and retold, is a conduit back to how it was. Here the past is only available as a story of the kind in which Tanizaki excels when he muses on how technology might have looked had the Japanese influence been stronger. This reverie invokes a sense of the past that cannot be considered to form any part of what historians call evidence. There are no events to check or patterns to trace. Rather, the role of the story is to evoke a verisimilitude that is necessarily vague, and which evokes a feeling of loss and longing. It is this feeling of yearning for what lies at the other side of an ungraspable distance, and not the past as such, which is the real object of sentimental concern (Illbruck 2012: 144). This feeling is being produced in the stories to which craft has traditionally been integral and in which it has been complicit, and which, in the vagueness articulated throughout its discipline, relationality and intangibility, allow such sentiment to flourish. The reluctance of the

elite gourmet classes and master *shokunin* to embrace the *sushi otaku* can be read as an urge to preserve this vagueness and hence sentiment for longing, a feeling of which they are the self-regarding stewards. They and their ilk are steeped in the ineffable sensitivity to the 'old ways' embodied by craft, but only suggestively in nuances that cannot be heard unless one is disposed to hear by birth and bearing.

So, with sushi we have three narratives woven as threads into a story. First we have a slightly Luddite reading of craft as a conduit to the integrity and dignity of the 'old ways'. Second comes a reading of craft being venerated as an instinctual, collective reaction by those who have sentimentalized experiences of longing and loss. This sentimentality is necessary because without it adherents have to then confront the suspicion that there is, indeed, no place to call an origin or 'home' to which they, as persons and a whole people might somehow return. Stuck on a feeling in this way, the *Sushi Otaku* also acknowledge in their actions the impossibility of retrieving the past and its spirit, but do so more joyously, allowing themselves to be prompted by an intense interest in craft. This is the third reading, in which the re-imagination of the past through craft affords exponents an emancipatory presence in the present whose spatial home is the sushi bar itself, to which one can arrive, albeit only ever in a spirit of care for its continual rebuilding, visit after visit. These *shokunin* who respond to this emerging subculture also move from the first and second to the third reading of their craft, willing to explore the possibility of difference that comes in the repetition of attempts at creating things steeped in qualities of relationality, discipline and the fleeting.

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