

Chapter 1 Craft Economies in Japan: The Re-Emergence of Alternative Economies in a No-Growth Context

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1 Introduction

The convergence of concerns about climate change and resource degradation with the financial crisis of 2008 has revealed fundamental instabilities in the tightly coupled global human-environment system. In particular, the notion of incessant growth has come into question (Daly, 1996). Yet, economic policies at the national and state/provincial levels remain oriented around the pursuit of aggregate economic growth, particularly as measured by GDP. That this sentiment underlies economic policies and dominates economic discourses is unsurprising, as the most powerful political and economic institutions are structurally dependent on the growth economy (Magdoff and Bellamy Foster 2009). Nevertheless, the widespread dissatisfaction with the direction of political economic developments in the aftermath of the financial crisis, most notably captured by the Occupy movement, suggests that there is widespread interest in charting an economic future that is more environmental and socially sustainable (Graeber, 2011).

The shift from material and energy intensive lifestyles toward more socially and ecologically sustainable forms implies a broad-based shift in social and economic institutions and practices, including cultural norms associated with consumption, prestige, success, and well-being. Numerous movements have sought to model, or pre-figure (Litfin, 2011), these new economic systems. Transition towns, the solidarity economy movement, and alternative currencies all provide conceptions of alternative economic systems and offer models of how industrial societies might accomplish a broad scale to transition more sustainable forms of consumption.

In the quest for models of sustainable consumption systems, Japan provides a compelling example. Lauded as a ‘miracle economy’ for its growth in the 1970s and 1980s (Johnson, 1982), and still the world’s third largest national economy, the country has experienced protracted economic stagnation over the last two decades. Cohen (2011) raises the question of whether Japan, by default, is leading the shift from consumer-led economic growth to a system that reduces pressure on natural systems, enhances social stability and augments well-being. The question rests on more than the country’s economic stagnation; beneath the materialism and mass consumerism of the late 20th century has remained strong cultural preferences for simplicity and thrift, localism and craftsmanship, and an ambivalence toward

mass-consumerism. Could social innovations in the unique Japanese context pre-figure more sustainable forms of consumption for Japan and beyond?

This paper explores this possibility through an examination of one particular economic network in Japan. Across the country, a diverse network of producers and consumers has established a burgeoning craft economy – an economic system based on the trade of locally produced goods and services that emphasizes quality handmade production, natural materials, and independence from globally-oriented economic institutions. The system relies on local actors engaged in everyday economic practices who in aggregate comprise a distinct, alternative economic configuration. The system reflects the legacy of a long-standing anti-consumerist impulse in Japanese culture and it finds intellectual support in the slow life movement that has spread through the country in the last decade. Furthermore, the movement has found heightened interest in the aftermath of the Fukushima nuclear disaster that followed the Tohoku Earthquake of March, 2011.

Research for the paper was conducted in the city of Kyoto, the historic center of craft arts in Japan, between April and December, 2011. Based on interviews with people from a number of sectors, including the corporate sector, civil service, and the craft sector, and participant observation in a number of craft economy activities, the research explored the extent to which a craft economy has emerged as an alternative economy. The first section of the paper presents background on the concept of alternative economies to demonstrate how distinct economies can exist in parallel with the global economy. The next section presents background information on consumerism in Japan through the 20th century, describing the trajectory of the national economy, the rise of consumerism, and the persistent ambivalence toward consumerism. Section four presents the empirical details of the case in Kyoto, and Section five discusses important themes raised by the observations. The final section concludes by returning to the question of whether the craft economy is a model for a no-growth economy.

2 Alternative Economies

The alternative economies approach is an action research paradigm that seeks to promote community economies based on economic units other than large corporations. It does this through understanding and demonstrating the viability of already existing economic practices that can be leveraged to build innovative developmental pathways (Gibson-Graham, 2008). Economic development conventionally relies on an export based theory of development, which describes how exports generate economic growth by bringing in money from outside the region, creating multiplier and spillover effects that lift the region. The alternative economies framework challenges this theory of development, promoting the reconfiguration of local economies around sustainable community interactions.

At the heart of the alternative economies approach is a discursive project that aims to reclaim what the economy is and how it is framed. Prevailing economic discourses represent the global economy as a remote and powerful sphere that seems to dictate the developmental options of locations and the lives of people (Healy and Graham, 2008). The alternative economies approach seeks to create a discursive space in which the possibility of economic self-determination is recognized and everyday economic practices are valued. It aims to create a sense that the economy can be familiar and intimate, thus empowering communities to create healthy economies and communities. The key to this discursive project is to ‘rupture the presumed unity of capitalism’ (Gibson-Graham and Roelvink, 2009) by

emphasizing the diversity of already existing economic activities and organizations. Non-capitalist market and non-market activities, which constitute more than 50% of all economic activity, are seen as starting points for imagining innovative developmental paths (Gibson-Graham, 2006). Instead of emphasizing scarcity, dissatisfaction and trade-offs, proponents of alternative economies emphasize the assets and capacities embodied in already existing economic activities within communities.

Unlike conventional economic discourses, the alternative economies framework embraces an ethical dimension of economic organization. It sees a responsibility in bringing unmet and often undescribed needs, such as community, belonging, safety and security, pleasure and peace, into view (Gibson-Graham, 2006). Alternative economy projects seek to empower marginalized actors within core community activities such as education systems, labor markets, political institutions and sociocultural life. It emphasizes community-controlled businesses, worker owned cooperatives, volunteering, gift-giving, bartering, non-market-oriented production. However, the ethical imperative is to prioritize not any particular form of organization or activities, but rather the open space of conversation that allows alternative economic conceptions to flourish (Gibson-Graham and Roelvink, 2009).

3 Consumerism in Japan

3.1 Twentieth Century Economic History

Japan's emergence as a global economic power in the later half of the twentieth century reflected both internal developments and increased engagement in the global economy. Rapid economic expansion began with the Meiji government's (1868 – 1912) push to modernize the Japanese economy and society upon opening the country. The Meiji government emphasized industrialization and integration of foreign technologies, and by the first World War, foreign companies had entered Japan, largely on the retail side, while mass production in key industries – iron, steel, and coal – characterized domestic production. Much of this production was organized by *zaibatsu*'s, family-owned holding companies that spanned multiple industries. The massive shift toward urbanization and industrialization began in the interwar years.

The post World War II era saw significant structural reforms and rapid economic resurgence. Land reforms significantly changed the rural sector, as cultivation of farmland by tenant farmers decreased from almost 50% in 1946 to 10% in 1950 (Iyoda 2010). Many of the *zaibatsu*'s were dissolved and their shares were sold to the public. Initially stringent reform measures imposed by the occupying US administration to cripple the Japanese economy were relaxed as Cold War policy shifted from weakening the Japanese economy to building a strong ally. The country's period of dramatic economic growth occurred between 1955 and 1975. Incomes increased by a factor of four during these years (Johnson, 1982).

The Japanese economy continued to expand through the 1970s and 1980s but its structural foundation began to shift from manufacturing to more speculative forms of investment, and a bubble economy emerged. Real estate and stock prices began to increase rapidly in 1983. Average share prices rose 490% from 1982 to 1989, while average commercial and residential land prices increased by 500% and 290%, respectively, over the same period (Iyoda 2010). The bubble continued to swell as tremendous amounts of money flowed into the economy. In 1991, with massive amount of bad debt in real estate and other investments, the bubble burst. Export industries, which had been the foundation of real economic growth

in the country, were hit hard as the yen appreciated significantly. Many companies transferred factories abroad, further hollowing-out the Japanese industrial sector. Public money was deployed to rescue banks and financial institutions, leading to a massive amount of outstanding government bonds. From 1991 to 2000, Japan had the biggest national budget in the world, and its current level of debt remains at almost 200% of GDP (Tabuchi, 2011).

The protracted stagnation has perplexed economic analysts. Some point to the fact that businesses, financial corporations and households had to adjust their assets following the bubble burst, causing a long-term deceleration in demand growth. Itoh (2000) argues that in addition to this adjustment, Japanese economic and social structures had difficulty adjusting to late 20th century globalization and became more inward oriented after the burst. The stagnation has left the national economy contracted, affecting households and consumers in addition to corporations and the public sector. The labor force participation rate for males decreased from 86.4% in 1953 to 72.8% in 2008, while the female rate declined from 56.7% to 45.7% over the same period (Iyoda, 2010). Significant reforms have been made in the labor management system. In an effort to reduce wages, the seniority wage system has been scaled back in favor of a results-oriented pay system. There has been a move toward low-cost nonregular workers, such as part-time workers and contract employees, which such positions increasing from 19.8% of the workforce in 1991 to 34.1% in 2008 (Iyoda, 2010).

3.2 Consumerism

Consumerism in Japan, which closely tracked the country's economic expansion over the 20th century, had both structural and cultural dimensions. Consumerism was structurally induced by the economic changes and associated landscape changes that took place in the interwar years. The expansion of intra-urban trams in the 1920s allowed suburban rail stops, such as Tokyo's Shinjuku and Shibuya, to emerge as central commercial and entertainment hubs (Sand, 2006). Suburbs began to expand as inter-city electric railroads proliferated and allowed consumers to travel into industrial belt cities like Yokohama, Nagoya and Kobe to work during the day and return to bedroom communities at night, bringing urban consumerism into quasi-rural Japan. Increasingly, high-rise danchi apartments were built through the industrial belt from the Tokyo/Yokohama conurbation in the east (now the world's largest urban conurbation) through Nagoya and Toyota City and to Osaka/Kyoto in the west. This high-rise landscape provided the basis for the consumer revolution, especially in household durables and electrical appliances.

The interwar period gave rise to the institutions that would come to define Japanese consumerism for decades: the department store, commercial complexes around transportation hubs, and the middle-class home (Partner, 1999). Consumer products, first durable goods like washers, refrigerators and black and white televisions in the 1960s, then automobiles, air conditioning and color televisions in the 1970s, became status symbols. Numerous scholars have described the important role of housewives in the rise of Japanese consumerism (Francks, 2009; Skov and Moeran, 1995). Women were framed as household managers who make major purchasing decisions, and thus they were the primary targets of marketing discourses. Skov and Moeran (1995) argue that consumption came to constitute an important element of female agency in Japan as women began to construct statements of self identities and social positioning through consumption, though this agency was at the same time constrained by fantasies of an ideal household life propagated through media.

As the economy shifted toward a speculation, mass consumerism took on a new dimension. Tokyo Disneyland opened in 1983, and soon after the Disneyfication Thesis

emerged as a central analysis of Japanese consumer culture. As Sand (2006:89) describes, ‘sophisticated new retail giants were transforming the space of the city into a colossal enclosed amusement park with no outside and no possibility for critical subjectivity.’ Yoshimi (1989 in Sand, 2006) describes how Shibuya had become ‘a single, encompassing advertisement, and a fantasy land.’ This marketing was directed primarily toward the country’s youth, who had been raised in prosperity and who asserted a liberation from the workaholic, passive consumerist nature of their parents. Clammers (2011) describes how severely the demands for conformity and performance perfection around consumerism are experienced by teens in Japan, while Creighton (1994:94) describes how consumerism in Japan is ‘less a way of “finding oneself” and more a way of linking selves with others.’

3.3 Ambivalence toward Consumerism

Even as mass consumerism seemed to increasingly engulf Japanese society through the 20th century, alternative conceptions of the good life recurrently emerged at different periods and in response to different phases of consumerism. As mass industrialization took root prior to World War I and during the interwar years, a nostalgia for the products of Tokogawa Era emerged (Francks, 2009). This nostalgia was expressed first in the folk-craft (*mingei*) movement of the 1920s. The movement, led by a group of public intellectuals and artists, emphasized the moral-aesthetic value of anonymous, indigenous, pre-industrial material cultures and artifacts and stressed these traditions as an alternative to the increasingly Westernized material culture. They extolled the beauty of humble objects of daily use such as clothing, implements and architecture, emphasizing their functionality, simplicity, naturalness, tradition, local specificity, durability, and inexpensive cost (Brandt, 2009). They argued that these objects, and the traditional, indigenous modes of commodity production that produced them, were central to the future of Japan and Japanese national identity. Brandt (2009) describes how this originally provocative concept of folk-crafts has now become ‘a seamless part of the common sense of Japanese cultural identity.’

The theme of recovering tradition again became a pervasive phenomenon in the 1970s, and there was a resurgence of the *mingei* movement. By the late 1980s, as consumer culture matured and took on new postmodern forms, there was a simultaneous cultural buzz around the ‘pursuit of authenticity’ (*honmono shikō*), ‘moving from material to non-material things’ (*mono kara koto e*), and ‘no-brand goods’ (Sand, 2006:97). The growing ambivalence toward consumerism at this time also included a concern that global consumer culture stripped Japanese cities, and Tokyo in particular, of their unique Japanese-ness and Asian-ness.

4 Contemporary Craft Economies

The craft economy explored in this research is defined as a contemporary economic network based on the production and consumption of craft items and services oriented around quality design and local sourcing of materials. The research was based on 24 in-depth, exploratory interviews with individuals involved a range of economic sectors, including the corporate sector, civil service, and the craft economy. Interviewees were all between the ages of 24 and 40. The focus on this age group was meant to explore preferences, values and lifestyle ambitions among an age cohort that grew up in the era of stagnation and that is now establishing economic livelihood patterns. Half of the interviewees held office jobs in either the corporate or government sectors. The other half of the interviewees were engaged at least part-time in the craft sector.

The concept of craft economies in Japan emerged inductively through this research. Early interviews revealed a bifurcated economic structure in which some actors were embedded in an economy oriented toward global economic institutions, whereas others were engaged primarily in a local, independent craft economy. Economies are subjective and shifting networks, and economic actors participate simultaneously in multiple economies, yet the interviewees gravitated toward distinct economic networks and practices. The research subsequently focused on understanding this craft economy as an alternative economy. In addition to the interviews, the author participated in numerous events, including craft fairs, art exhibitions and social events. This section first describes the outlook of young Japanese who are embedded in conventional economic structures, and the remainder describes the craft economy both in terms of its structure and more normative aspects expressed by participants.

4.1 General Economic Outlook

The structural changes in the Japanese economy since the late 1990s have had very real impacts on the lives of young professionals. While the seniority wage system is still in place, the notion of lifetime employment has almost completely evaporated from the outlook of the young. Contract work and other non-regular work is extremely common. Civil servants were universally in contract positions that they would have to leave within a limited number of years (usually three). Some expected transfers to other government agencies; others did not. These workers were all in junior positions; presumably workers at higher level positions are afforded more stability. Others worked in government agencies but were hired through temporary employment firms. Private sector employees were not subject to contract limits, but most were also hired through temporary agencies. Work hours are long, and overtime pay is not expected. Of the people interviewed, only two, both in the corporate sector, expressed confidence that they were in a job with long-term stability. One, who worked for Panasonic, described being part of a corporate institution that promotes employees through a strongly hierarchical system that breeds company loyalty and labor stability.

Young Japanese professionals are aware of having grown up in the era of stagnation, yet they did not express gloom about their own prospects. Rather, they expressed a sense of obligation and inevitability about their positionality within the contracted economy. Common phrases among young professionals regarding their employment situations were ‘I have to,’ and ‘I don’t have any choice.’ As consumers, they remain active participants in consumer culture – the shopping districts around major transportation hubs have remained key nodes in the urban social space – yet major lifestyle purchases like houses and cars were not considered by any of the respondents under 34. About half of the interviewees working in the government and corporate sectors lived with their parents.

4.2 The Craft Economy

The craft economy explored in this research comprises a network of economic actors based largely in Kyoto who are engaged in the production and consumption of craft items and services oriented around quality design and local sourcing of materials. Objects include bags and purses, shoes, jewelry, clothing, furniture, bicycles, and pottery. Services include garden design, interior design, hair styling, café proprietorship, photography/graphic design, and organic farming. There are no membership rules or formal certification in this network, though organic and fair trade labels are common. Nevertheless, the network coheres as a distinct and cohesive alternative economy.

The craft economy operates through a network that includes production systems, a range of retail opportunities, and social gatherings and public events. Production systems originate with independent designers and craft artists. Some have inherited their occupation after several generations of practice within their family. Others were trained in art and design schools, while others are largely self-trained. Retail opportunities link these producers with each other and with consumers. These opportunities include monthly craft markets and antique fairs held regularly at several of the city's temples; independent store front shops; art galleries, cafes and bookstores; periodic gatherings such as art festivals, rallies for social causes, and concert events; and to some extent wholesaling to chain stores. The ubiquitous coop system also provides a well-established institution for connecting producers and consumers, mostly around agriculture goods and services but extending to other craft objects and services as well. The craft economy in Kyoto coheres as a predominately urban network, though with rural linkages.

The network is built on a system of mutual support, interdependence, and friendship. Many actors engaged in the craft economy knew each other. Social gatherings play an important role in strengthening and expanding the network and providing opportunities. For example, six interviewees who manage galleries, independent stores or cafes all described linking with local producers to offer locally products. Each of these establishments was designed by local designers and built by local carpenters, and in each case the proprietor described the person who did that work as a friend. It is common for most or all of the objects in a shop to be produced by friends of the proprietor. Bartering and gift-giving is common, though there is a sense of mutual support through the purchase of goods and services. Most of the craft economy actors interviewed expressed a willingness to pay high prices for quality objects and services, even when their disposable income was low. Several expressed a delight in acquiring these items and services and talked at length about their favorite objects.

Local production is highly valued, though the value placed on local production was generally not described in economic terms but in personal or aesthetic terms. While the core of the network comprised Kyoto residents, producers often came from other parts of Japan at the invitation of friends or to participate in events in the city. The preference for locally made products and local services was thus relative. Numerous interviewees spoke with pride of objects that are made in Japan. Antique objects and foreign objects are also valued if they demonstrate a unique quality or history. A key aspect in the cohesion of the craft economy is the narratives that accompany economic activities. Producers are introduced among friends with a high sense of esteem for the artist. The storyline of the producer is invited and shared. Conversations explore how things are made, where materials are sourced, and the lineage of the producer.

While few interviewees referenced it explicitly, the craft economy seems to have an intellectual foundation in the slow life trend that has burgeoned through the country in the last several years devoted to slow living, self-sufficiency, the natural life, and country living. Numerous magazines, such as *Ku:Nei*, *Sokoto*, *At Home*, and *Slow Life*, promote the values of local design and craftsmanship. In addition to 'slow food,' the movement promotes 'slow wear,' which values traditional costumes and woven and dyed fabrics, 'slow house,' the construction of durable homes from wood, bamboo and paper, 'slow industry,' which promotes urban agriculture and green tourism, and 'slow education,' which de-emphasizes academic achievement in favor of communication, the arts and hobbies (JFS, 2003). Musician Ryuichi Sakamoto, a widely recognized champion of the slow life movement, describes its economic implications, saying "The current economic system has required

people to be busy trying to achieve growth – it's as though they're continually riding a bicycle. People have to do things fast to meet the demand for excessive efficiency...I think it would be better if Japan became a beautiful third-rate country. It would be nice if Japan was a place of delicious food, beautiful scenery and abundant nature. If that were the case, I think it wouldn't matter if one had little money" (Lennard, 1985).

5 Discussion

The craft economy network operates as an alternative economy, and it embodies the potentiality expressed in the alternative economies literature. While interviewees expressed a general rejection of mass consumer society, they more often emphasized the positive attributes of products, services and relationships they obtain through the network. In celebrating these assets of the community, the actors are recognizing the possibility of, and creating, an alternative developmental path. They are valorizing economic activities which many of them would be doing anyway (e.g., running cafes, farming, making furniture), yet the density of the network has created an economic structure and a culture that supports these producers, grows a consumer base and allows other producers to enter the network. Institutions which remain largely invisible in conventional economic discourses, including the centuries-old markets, are allowing what would be marginal activities to be central activities in this alternative economy.

Key institutions explicitly embody the craft economy ideals: cooperatives, craft fairs, and independent shops carrying items made by friends and local craftspeople. All of the actors who were interviewed did utilize chain stores at some points, however, showing that, in practice, the boundaries of this alternative economy are porous. The craft economy coheres as a relational network through emphasis on ethical values, which are promoted through conversations and dialogue. Conversations about lifestyle values and quality of life occur frequently within the craft economy network, and these conversations create the ethical space that Gibson-Graham and Roelvink (2009) assert as being at the center of alternative economies.

To what extent does the emergence of this craft economy represent an adaption to the economic stagnation that has plagued Japan for the last two decades, and to what extent can it therefore be viewed as a economic model for a transition to broader no-growth economy? This research suggests that the craft economy is rooted in several intertwined social currents. The craft economy in Kyoto and the broader slow life movement in Japan are partly expressions of the long-standing ambivalence toward consumerism in Japan, reflected in the mingei movement and subsequent anti-consumer movements. The cultural and aesthetic values promoted by the mingei movement of the early 20th century, notably the preference for handmade products, simple designs and natural materials, are at work in the contemporary craft economy in Kyoto. Unlike the mingei movement, however, the contemporary craft economy allows for expensive prices, if only to provide living wages to its producers. In addition, contemporary producers did not exhibit a sense of anonymity and self-denial, but rather pride in their craft and appreciation for the opportunity to survive on their work. The legacy of the Kyoto's history as the center of traditional Japanese arts, such as basketry, calligraphy and ceramics, is an important influence on the current craft economy. The most compelling evidence that the contemporary craft economy represents a new adaption to the no-growth context of the contemporary macroeconomy is the buzz around the positive lifestyle attributes expressed by participants in the network relative to the powerlessness expressed by those in other sectors.

6 Conclusion

The craft economy in Kyoto is a robust urban-based economic network, with linkages to rural areas and other cities in Japan, that represents an alternative economic system. Among the most compelling findings from the research is the extensiveness of the network, which allows participations to provide for most of their needs within the network, almost completely avoiding participation in more globally-connected economic institutions such as chain retail stores and corporately owned grocery stores. Economic activities within the network are also supported by social networking and by a cultural movement that values a slower, simpler life, community and health.

The example of Japan is important and compelling for a number of reasons. The country's economy is one of the largest in the world and the material standard of living is very high, though the economic stagnation suggests that the era of continual economic growth may be over. On the other hand, social innovations toward more sustainable consumption forms may be emerging in Japan, drawing on historic cultural patterns. Importantly, these questions have garnered increased attention in the aftermath of the Tohoku earthquake and ensuing nuclear disaster that unfolded in March, 2011. Conversations about possible energy futures have intensified and included discussions of alternative lifestyle ambitions and livelihood patterns.

If this movement does represent a viable alternative economic system, an important question is whether it is a transferable model and if so how it can be supported by policy. There are elements of craft economy networks across the mature economies. The craft economies of Italy were an early impetus for academic focus on the development of creative economies, though that example was used as a model of economic growth rather than a model for a no-growth society (Storper, 1997). Artisan products are increasingly valued among the localist and sustainable consumption movements in the US and Europe (Heying, 2010), suggesting that the craft economy may be burgeoning elsewhere. This research suggests that artisan or craft economies can be viewed as potential alternative and more sustainable economies, especially when they can both draw on and generate a cultural movement that valorizes their work as a developmental pathway.

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