

1 From souvenirs to experiences and networking: Consumer culture and intangibilization of Japanese craft tourism

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Abstract

This chapter aims to discuss how changes in consumer culture induce transformations of commodified cultures. By exploring the case studies of Japanese craft tourism, it will be argued that a new style of craft tourism with an emphasis on experience and personal networking is on the rise. The penetration of the experiential economy has triggered not only the change of craft tourism but also the diversification of craft culture itself, namely by a phenomenon that can be called the 'intangibilization' (Yamagishi, 2023) of craft culture.

This chapter consists of five sections. After the introduction, the next section briefly explains the trends and shifts in contemporary Japanese consumer culture and some important sociocultural contexts in which those changes have occurred. The third section discusses how the changes in consumer cultures have provoked a rise in a new style of craft tourism. By looking at the case of Takaoka Craft Tourism, it will be argued that experience and networking opportunities have been newly commodified as tourism attractions. The fourth section will capture the transformations of craft culture in today's experience economy from three aspects: reconstruction of producer-consumer relationships; intangibilization of traditional craft culture; and democratization of traditional craft culture. The last section will be the concluding remarks.

Note that the arguments made in this chapter only apply to one of the many aspects of contemporary craft tourism in Japan.

Keywords: Experience, networking, souvenirs, consumer culture, Japan

Introduction

The nature of craft tourism is diversifying in Japan, particularly since the 2010s. Craft culture, which has been built on the continuous cycle of production and consumption of craft objects, is newly evolving into a market for experiences and personal networking opportunities.

This development encompasses four phases, incorporating different consumer interests: shopping, gazing, doing, and connecting. The history of shopping for craft souvenirs dates to the premodern Edo era, marking the inception of domestic tourism in Japan. Gazing at craft processes – which is a highly modern phenomenon – became prominent in the 1970s when domestic tourism surged and local traditional craft industries were institutionalized in 1974. The individualization of domestic tourism in the 1980s triggered the initial commodification of craft processes, a trend that has gained momentum in today's experience economy. And lastly, connecting with artisans is a new phenomenon that sprouted since the 2010s, enabled by the penetration of SNS communications.

The emerging trends and changes in Japanese craft tourism pose several questions: What drives the changes in craft tourism? How is the contemporary model of craft tourism characterized? And finally, how do those shifts impact the nature of craft tourism and craft culture itself?

Changes and trends in contemporary Japanese consumer culture

Consumer culture, a reflection of societal changes, has experienced notable transformations in Japan. The key characteristics of contemporary Japanese consumer culture can be largely summarized with the following terms: human, social, ecological, local, Japanese, simple, natural, spiritual, and shareable (Miura, 2014). There are numerous socio-cultural backgrounds and contexts in which the new type of consumer culture has evolved, including the burst of the bubble economy, depopulation, experiences of natural disasters, and the advent of the Internet. This section will briefly explore the transformations of Japanese consumer culture that underlie the changes in consumer behaviors