

A Study on the Regional Characteristics of Pattern Education Activities in Meiji Japan

Zhenghuan Li^{1*}

¹ School of Fine Arts, Nanjing Normal University, Nanjing, China

Email Address

li4137118@163.com (Zhenghuan Li)

*Correspondence: li4137118@163.com

Received: 17 August 2025; **Accepted:** 6 September 2025; **Published:** 17 October 2025

Abstract:

After “pattern” was introduced into Japan as a translation of the modern Western design concept, it made the design process independent from the traditional manufacturing process and presented itself to the world. This changed the production method in which the design process and the manufacturing subject were combined in the era of handmade objects, calling for practitioners specializing in patterns. Education for such practitioners became an important issue in society at that time. After all, education, as a social activity, has been combined with the labor process of humans seeking material living resources since its inception. Therefore, it is a general trend to form educational activities centered around patterns, and when pattern education activities occur, they also form certain regional characteristics.

Keywords:

Meiji Period in Japan, Meiji Pattern, Design Concept, Pattern Education Activity, Regional Characteristics

1. Introduction

During the Meiji period, Japan underwent social transformation through the implementation of the national policies of “civilization and modernization” and “promoting industry and agriculture”. This transformation introduced Western design concepts to Japan and created conditions for the emergence of educational activities centered around these concepts. For example, the concept of “pattern” was introduced as a translation term and gradually became popular; the importance of patterns for industrial development was recognized; the demand for pattern talents for industrial development emerged; and the social function of education was re-examined. With these conditions in place, educational activities centered around patterns were formed in Japanese society, which in turn gave rise to certain regional characteristics in pattern education activities.

2. Introduction and Popularization of Design Concepts

The introduction and popularization of design concepts gradually help people understand what design is, what form and form it is. Only when people have a certain understanding of concepts, will educational activities be formed around design

concepts. The Vienna World Expo in 1873 (Meiji 6) was also Japan's first official participation in an international event after more than 200 years of closure. The purpose of this exhibition was also very clear. The Meiji Restoration government achieved the exchange and learning of advanced science, technology, and cultural systems from Western powers through talent dispatch and technology transfer during the exposition process. It was also during this expo that Japan first came into contact with Western design concepts and understood that after the West entered industrial production, it had separated itself from the creative process and presented it independently, creating the term "design" to correspond to "design". Due to the fact that the members of the inspection pattern participating in the World Expo mainly come from the upper class of Japan, including the imperial family, nobles, government officials, wealthy businessmen, etc. These groups mainly come from the upper echelons of society and the power centers of the state, so after the design concept was introduced into Japan, it was mainly disseminated through a top-down and center to center approach.

2.1. Official Joint Meeting

After the Vienna World Expo, Japan also participated in the 1876 (Meiji 9) Philadelphia Exposition in the United States. After accumulating certain experience through these two World Expos, Japan held its first domestic trade fair in 1877 (Meiji 10). The purpose of holding the China International Industrial Fair is to introduce design concepts, revitalize national industries, and enhance technological exchanges in the domestic industry. [1] Spread the design concept to the whole country and popularize it to the general public through the domestic business promotion expo.

2.2. Official documents

The use of the term 'design' in official documents can also indicate the official acceptance of design concepts, which can be disseminated and popularized through official channels in the form of documents. For example, the appearance of "art" and "appearance" in the 1873 (Meiji 6) "Production Regulations for Adding Payment to Production Attendance Requests"; The "photo press" after the Vienna World Expo; The "Craftsman" in the report of the first China International Fair and the "Work Plan" in the classification of exhibited works; Moving on to the use of the term 'Yijiang' in the 'Yijiang Regulations'.

2.3. Group organization

Taking the Longchi Society established in 1879 (Meiji 12) as an example, one of the group's tasks is to translate and introduce Western design related information, such as methods, ideas, principles, concepts, etc., and then spread it to the domestic industry through the establishment of government newspapers, speeches, and other forms, in order to re-examine traditional Japanese art and crafts and achieve the goal of industrial revitalization. There are many similar groups, such as the Greater Japan Textile Association, Tokyo Woodworking Association, Greater Japan Kiln Industry Association, and so on. They introduce design concepts in the form of points, and then spread and popularize them from point to surface.

2.4. Government school

In 1876 (Meiji 9), the Ministry of Works, as the main driving force for the national policy of industrialization, established the Ministry of Works University Affiliated Art

School, also known as the Ministry of Works Art School, to transplant and teach Western techniques in the field of “art”. The purpose of establishing an art school is also very clear, mainly to “remove the old professional style of Japan through modern European technology and become an assistant to the Hundred Crafts” [2]. This is also the earliest official higher education institution to introduce Western design concepts. Although the Ministry of Works Art School was abolished after several years due to financial difficulties and changes in social forms in the future, it played an important role in introducing design concepts and cultivating a group of pattern related talents for Japan in the early Meiji period, such as Tadao Asai, Shou Matsuoka, and Masataro Koyama, which played a cornerstone role in early pattern education in Japan.

3. Realizing the Importance of Patterns for Industrial Development

Most of the exhibits at the Vienna World Expo are traditional ethnic crafts with Japanese characteristics. The reason is that even before the World Expo, German Wagner, as a consultant, had already proposed using traditional crafts that could reflect Japanese characteristics instead of using products with immature technology. They all believe that this can better showcase Japan’s national craftsmanship characteristics to the world and also announce Japan’s existence to the world.

At the World Expo, members of the exhibition inspection team visited products from European and American countries, gained exposure to and understanding of Western design concepts, and realized that the design process itself already exists in traditional Japanese creations, and its state is only hidden inside, not visible externally. In Kumi Bunmu’s “Notes on the Vienna World Expo”, it is recorded as follows:

At this World Expo, China’s exhibits have a high reputation for three reasons: compared to Europe, our handicraft scheme is unique and considered rare; there are fewer masterpieces from neighboring countries; in recent years, Europe has given high praise to Japan, with handicrafts being particularly outstanding. [3]

By using the term ‘unique design scheme’ in the record, it indicates that after understanding Western design concepts, the members of the inspection team have realized that the design process has long been hidden in traditional Japanese creations, but has not been independently presented. At the same time, they also realized that the design process was related to the development of various industries in their country, because at this time Japan was in the initial stage of modernization, and foreign trade was mainly based on traditional handicrafts. The success of Japan at the Vienna World Expo made upper level leaders and handicraft practitioners aware of the important role of design in the revitalization of national industries, and regarded it as a means of industrial revitalization in the Meiji era.

4. The Demand for Pattern Talents in Industrial Development

The importance of patterns for industrial development has been recognized by people and regarded as an important part of industrial revitalization. However, at that time, there was a huge demand for pattern talents in various industries, and pattern talents were scarce. There were very few people who could be called pattern artists, and experts were extremely rare. The number of pattern talents is far from meeting the demand for pattern talents in industrial development. In Europe and America at that time, the number of pattern makers required varied depending on the size of the factory. In small factories, there were at least 2 to 3 people, while larger factories had a higher demand for pattern makers, so that each factory could produce the special

patterns required for the product. [4] Compared with European and American countries, it was evident that pattern talents did not meet the required ratio in various industries in Japan at that time.

5. The Educational Function Can Be Re-examined

Before the Meiji Restoration, the education system in Japan was conducted in the form of feudal schools, rural schools, temple houses, and private schools. The content of education is mainly based on Confucianism and Buddhism as the spiritual core, educating people's hearts and following the principles of loyalty and filial piety. There is no fixed format for teaching, and there are no specific textbooks. Any Confucian or Buddhist classic book can be designated as a textbook. The reason for the formation of this educational model is that since ancient times, the ruling class has regarded education as a means to constrain the thoughts of the ruled, stabilize various classes, and facilitate governance through education. Education focuses more on spiritual education, forming a society dominated by humanities. Therefore, even after the spark of Western natural science was introduced, it did not spread and even showed a trend of being extinguished, deeply influenced by the cultures of neighboring countries. The reason is that Japan has been a cultural importing country for neighboring countries since ancient times. Even after the Tokugawa shogunate implemented a policy of isolationism, it only implemented limited opening to China and Korea in specific ports, and did not impose restrictions on Confucian and Buddhist classics from China. However, European books and religious doctrines that were not conducive to feudal rule or Christian doctrine were prohibited. It cannot be seen from this that education before Meiji was only used by feudal rulers as a tool to maintain feudal rule and imprison the thoughts of the ruled.

After entering the Meiji era, Japan's national goal was to become prosperous and strong in the military. To achieve this, it implemented a new policy, opened its doors, and learned from Western powers in politics, military, economy, culture, and other aspects, striving to promote national development through comprehensive reforms. The development of a country requires the participation of all members of society as citizens in order to achieve it. Therefore, how to use education as a social activity to increase the knowledge, improve quality, and enhance technology of citizens has become a new demand for education in the development of a country. Education, as a social activity, has been integrated with the labor process of human beings seeking material means of livelihood since its inception. [5] Obviously, the content and mode of feudal education can no longer meet the needs of national development for education, and the function of education is being re examined in the process of reform. As stated in "A History of Modern Education":

In a reformed country, social change will bring new demands. In order to better meet the new social needs, before the abolition of feudal domains and the establishment of counties, schools in each domain had already begun to reward foreign schools, actively establish foreign schools, introduce and hire foreign teachers, and absorb Western ideas and culture. [6]

This also echoes the Meiji government's national policy of "civilizing and opening up" by advocating for "outdated customs, establishing fairness based on heaven and earth, and seeking knowledge from the world", meeting the new demand for education in national development.

6. Pattern Education Activities Form Regional Characteristics

The concept of design has been introduced and gradually popularized, and the importance of patterns in industrial development has been recognized by people. The development of various industries has a strong demand for pattern talents, and the function of education has been re examined. Under the influence of these factors, educational activities have been formed with patterns as the object, and certain regional characteristics have been formed in the process of their occurrence.

In the “120 Year History of the Design Regulations” section of the “Relocation of Design”, detailed records were made of design related activities and events nationwide during the Meiji period from five aspects: company establishment, technology, books and magazines, schools, and design theft issues. According to data statistics, the specific situation is as follows: the total number of cases nationwide is 303, with 164 cases in Tokyo, 33 cases in Kyoto, 16 cases in Osaka, 6 cases in Yokohama, 5 cases in Arita, 3 cases in Nagasaki, 2 cases in Nagoya, 1 case in Nara, 1 case in Kagawa, 1 case in Ishikawa, 1 case in Chiba, 1 case in Ashikaga, 1 case in Morimura, and 68 cases nationwide. [7]

From the data, it can be seen that during the Meiji period, events and activities related to design in the Tokyo area accounted for a huge proportion of the total national proportion, indirectly indicating Tokyo’s core position in the graphic industry at that time. The second is national event activities, such as importing oil painting tools; After the “civilization and enlightenment”, the domestic manufacturing industry imitated Western imported goods; The introduction of foreign technicians, among other things, has made Kyoto the third region, which is clearly second only to Tokyo in terms of design related activities and events. Through this data analysis, it directly proves Kyoto’s position as a secondary nucleus in the pattern world at that time. This also indicates that pattern education activities are distributed in a regional pattern with Tokyo as the main core and Kyoto as the secondary core.

Taking higher graphic education schools as an example. There are three schools in Tokyo, namely the Ministry of Works School of Fine Arts (Meiji 9), the Tokyo School of Fine Arts Tukey Branch (Meiji 29), and the Tokyo Higher Industrial School (Meiji 30). However, there are only two schools in Kyoto, namely the Craft Pattern Department of Kyoto City Art and Crafts School (Meiji 24) and the Pattern Department of Kyoto High School of Arts and Crafts (Meiji 35).

Taking the event of the Society for the Advancement of Pattern Education as an example. Tokyo held three domestic trade fairs, namely the first domestic trade fair in 1877 (Tokyo Ueno Park), the second domestic trade fair in 1881 (Tokyo Ueno Park), and the third domestic trade fair in 1890 (Tokyo Ueno Park). And Kyoto only had one, the fourth domestic trade fair in 1895 (Kyoto Okazaki Park).

In addition, whether it is industry groups that initiate industrial pattern education, such as the Greater Japan Textile Association, Tokyo Sculpture Association, Japan Lacquer Association, Tokyo Foundry Association, or pattern research groups that emerge and intervene in industrial pattern education in the future, such as the Greater Japan Pattern Association, Japan Pattern Association, Caixia Association, etc., Tokyo is the majority, followed by Kyoto.

7. Conclusions

The pattern education activities during the Meiji period in Japan were mainly recognized by the public after the Western design concept was translated into the domestic language as “pattern”. At the same time, they realized its importance for industrial development, which in turn had an urgent demand for pattern talents. Therefore, after the educational function was re examined, it was able to take place, forming unique regional characteristics. Because Tokyo is located in the Kanto region of Japan, and Kyoto is located in the Kansai region of Japan, separated by the central region, and educational activities related to patterns in other areas are scattered, such as Kanazawa District Industrial School, Kagawa Prefecture Craft School, Toyama Prefecture Craft School, etc., which are not as frequent and intensive as those in Tokyo and Kyoto. However, pattern education activities in Kyoto are not as frequent as those in Tokyo. Therefore, pattern education activities show a dual core distribution of Tokyo as the national and Kanto core, and Kyoto as the national sub core and Kansai core.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

References

- [1] Ogata, K. Pioneers of the Meiji Period. Design Studies Special Issue, Japan Design Association, 1998, 6(2).
- [2] Ichikawa, Y. A Study on the Historical Changes of the Concepts of "Craft" and "Artisan". Regional Policy Studies, 2007, 10(1).
- [3] Kutsuzawa, N. The 1873 Vienna World's Fair and Japan's Participation: Focusing on Japan's Industrial Promotion Policy in the Early Meiji Period (p. 76). Records of the Special Envoy's Tour of the United States and Europe (Vol. 5). Iwanami Shoten. 1982.
- [4] Ogata, K. Meiji and Design: The Great Japan Pattern Association and the Magazine “Tu'an (Pattern)”. Bulletin of Shukugawa Gakuin Junior College (Vol. 3). Shukugawa Gakuin Junior College. 1978.
- [5] Ogata, K. Meiji and Design: The Great Japan Pattern Association and the Magazine “Tu'an (Pattern)”. Bulletin of Shukugawa Gakuin Junior College (Vol. 3). Shukugawa Gakuin Junior College. 1978.
- [6] Ogawa, M. A History of Early Modern Education. Hobunkan. 1910.
- [7] Japan Patent Office, Design Division. 120 years of the design system. Japan Patent Office. 2009.



© 2025 by the author(s); licensee International Technology and Science Publications (ITS), this work for open access publication is under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0). (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)