Abstract:
This paper aims to crystallise the social function of Japan’s Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) as a social milieu of ‘tradition’, empowered by people’s living experience of production and consumption of ‘tradition’. Japan has been operating its Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) systems for more than half a century since 1951. The government supports many practitioners of traditional performing arts, craft techniques, and folkloric customs. Highly skilled artists and craftsmen recognized as custodians of traditional cultural expressions are known as ‘Ningen Kokuho’ (‘Living National Heritage’, hereafter LNH)¹ and enjoy widespread respect. People in contemporary Japan continue to engage in many traditional practices despite drastic social and cultural changes in the previous century. To date, however, the study of ICH has focused mainly on institutional functions, ideologies and impacts. Little attempt has been made to understand how people experience ICH in their daily lives. Japanese ICH exemplifies established social institutions in the context of the large-scale society in a developed country. It is different from examples found in developing countries where ‘peripheral culture’ is displayed for and consumed by tourists from richer countries. But it is also similar in its source as Western influence meets resistance to homogenized ways of living brought by it. As societies inevitably follow ongoing globalization, it is critical to examine ICH as a social normative through which people respect tradition for its own sake.

Some nations, such as the U.K., find the concept of preservation of living culture confusing or difficult to grasp; they may ask ‘should cultural performances, folklories, be preserved?’ (Nas: 2002), or ‘will preservation not result in fossilisation and alienation from the living sociocultural source, or will it revitalise culture and foster the invention of tradition?’ (de Jong: 2007). In fact, UNESCO’s ICH Convention (ICH) established in 2004 and other policies prior to ICHC were criticised as ‘a mere contextualisation of living culture represented as ICH list’ (Kirshenblit-Gimblet, 2004). More than often, the Western heritage study interprets ICH as ‘authentification’ of tradition by the state authority where the authority is positioned as a subject while the cultural form and the practitioners, and the local community as object to be ‘safeguarded’. Consumers and markets are often reviled as negative forces which exploit people and their culture, manipulating them and eventually distorting the original forms of tradition (Urry, 1990). However, no cultural form has ever been ‘born’ with the status of ‘tradition’ or as ‘heritage’ to be ‘safeguarded’. I argue that Japanese ICH is enfranchising activity of cultural forms as ‘tradition’ in contemporary society to mediate four elements: (i) production activity of ‘tradition’ by practitioners, (ii) experience of ‘tradition’ by people, (iii) objectification of social meaning of ‘tradition’, and (iv) objectification of ‘traditional skill’ in their socio-economic, political, and cultural activities.

Using a phenomenological point of view (Merleau-Ponty, 1962), I focus on Japanese traditional clothing, kimono. I examine that the social milieu of ‘tradition’ communicates craftspeople, consumers, and social milieu of ‘tradition’: craftspeople preserve their traditional skills while being creative in their works to be worn by present people, and consumers determine their purchase decision of kimono for their practical use. By the interactive activities of production and consumption, ‘traditional craft products’ exists in the contemporary, globalised market economy. I argue that ‘tradition’ has been always ‘served in fresh’ for people to practice and to enjoy rather than ‘preserved’.

¹ In Japan, it is operated under the law of “Important Intangible Cultural Property” by the Agency for Cultural Affairs established in 1950. (Agency for Cultural Affairs) The word for Living National Heritage is widely known as “Ningen-Kokuho” (Living National Treasure). This is not the official term in the Intangible Cultural Property Law, but was created by media since when the law was enacted in 1951.

² The major policy was the ‘Proclamation of the Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity’ established in 1997 (UNESCO).
Reference


UNESCO ICH Convention