

How to Award a Prize: An Ethnography of a Juried Ceramic Art Exhibition in Japan

Brian Moeran
Copenhagen Business School

Abstract

This article discusses the social processes among members of a panel of jurors required to award a major prize to one of the submissions to a national ceramics exhibition in Japan. Uniquely based on participant observation-style fieldwork, the article details the voting procedures and (inconclusive) results, before analysing why one particular potter's submission was selected for the Princess Chichibu Cup. It shows how social relations, rather than aesthetic taste, influenced the final choice, since jury members operated according to an informal pecking order that depended on pre-existing networks and reputations, themselves determined by seniority and age. The fact that judges did not overtly resort to aesthetic criteria when making their evaluations meant that they considered each submission in relation to other submissions, rather than on their own particular merits. They thus ended up comparing 'incommensurate flaws', rather than making a selection according to agreed 'merit'. And yet 'meritocratic principles' seem to prevail in the longer term cumulative recognition of potters who are awarded prizes at such exhibitions.

Keywords

Awards, Ceramic art, Evaluative practices, Japan, Jury, Prizes

Author Bio

Brian Moeran is Professor of Business Anthropology at the Copenhagen Business School and founding editor of the Open Access *Journal of Business Anthropology* (www.cbs.dk/jba). A social anthropologist by training, he has written extensively on different aspects of cultural production, primarily in Japan. Among his books are *A Japanese Advertising Agency* (Curzon, 1996), *Folk Art Potters of Japan* (Curzon, 1997) and *The Business of Ethnography* (Berg, 2005). He may be reached at bdm.ikl@cbs.dk

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Prizes and Awards

This article describes and analyses the selection and prize awarding processes for a biennial ceramics exhibition in Japan. Based on long-term fieldwork in the 'art world' (Becker 1982) of contemporary Japanese ceramics, as well as on participant observation of the processes concerned, the article addresses and draws upon two sets of sociological writings – one concerned with prizes and awards; the other with evaluative practices.¹

Given that prizes are economic instruments well-suited to achieving cultural objectives along social, institutional and ideological axes (English 2005: 50), scholars in a number of different disciplines have recently begun to consider the sociological and economic effects of prizes and awards (see, e.g., Belk 1995; Nelson et al. 2001; English 2002; Ginsburgh 2003), building on earlier work by Goode (1978). This is in part due to reflection upon the observed proliferation of prizes in many different sectors of contemporary society (English 2005) – from academia (Best 2008) to book publishing (Squires 2004), by way of industrial design (Gemser & Wijnberg 2002), and the corporate sector in general (Magnus 1981; Nelson 2005). It is also in part due to an interest in observing how exactly culture and economy, together with their respective forms of capital (Bourdieu 1993, 1996), interact with each other. Indeed, Bourdieu's distinction between 'restricted' and 'large scale' forms of cultural production has formed the theoretical basis for a number of studies of prizes, especially in the fields of literature (English 2002; Mack 2004; Norris 2006; Squires 2007) and film (de Valck 2007; de Valck and Soeteman 2010).

The concept of 'field' has also become central to organizational theorists who have observed how institutional forces, social practices, and organizational forms manifest themselves in institutional life (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). These scholars' writings, however, owe more to American institutional than to classical French sociology, and focus on the resolution of collective rationality, rather than on opposition and conflict, as the organizing principle in a field (DiMaggio 1979). This gives rise to a concern with such issues as field formation and field evolution (Powell et al. 2005). One approach, drawing on the work of Arjun Appadurai (1986), has been to look at fairs, festivals and other competitive events as 'tournament rituals' (Anand and Watson 2004), 'tournaments of values' (Moeran 1993, 2010), and sites of field configuration (Lampel and Mayer 2008, Moeran and Strandgaard Pedersen 2011). It is in this context that organizational theorists have looked at prizes and awards, which they see as facilitating exchanges among a wide range of constituents by means of 'transorganizational structures' (Anand and Jones 2008).

Meanwhile, economists have tried to compute the financial implications of awards by measuring – in the case of 'experience goods' like film and theatre, for example – such variables as movie theatre rentals, number of performances, average ticket prices

and revenues per screen or theatre, and the probability of survival of award-winning productions (Nelson et al. 2001; Deuchert et al. 2005; Boyle and Chiou 2009). Some have tackled the relationship between quality and quantity in other ways by measuring, for example, the effect of the Pulitzer Prize on news quality and newspaper circulations (Logan and Sutter 2004). Others have used industry measures (like best movie lists and publishers' new editions) to gauge the long-term 'aesthetic quality' of nominated and prize-winning experience goods, and concluded that 'awards are bad predictors of... fundamental quality or talent' (Ginsburgh 2003: 109). Economists have also looked at the Queen Elizabeth Music (Glejser and Heyndels 2001; Ginsburgh and van Ours 2003) and Eurovision Song (Ginsburgh 2005) contests, and shown an interest in sociological issues such as incentives (e.g. Wright 1983), esteem, reputation, social status, and positional goods (Frey 2006: 379).

The study of prizes and awards, then, is extremely rich in theoretical potential. But it is hampered by the fact that *how* prizes are allocated has remained a black box for scholars who have been unable to delve behind the scenes of awarding processes. Occasionally, they have made use of records revealing individual judges' opinions about a particular prize when they are available (Mack 2004); very occasionally, they have interviewed judges (English 2005: 122; de Valck and Soeteman 2010; Mathieu and Bertelsen 2013). But still, we have only second-hand reports on what actually goes on during the jurying process in a film festival or art exhibition.

This article's contribution to the literature on prizes and awards is two-fold. Firstly, it presents what is at present a unique ethnographic account of the social processes leading up to a jury's decision about which submission should be awarded the major prize at a national ceramic art exhibition in Japan. This account can then be compared with the findings of Michèle Lamont (2009) who was also able to conduct fieldwork in the panels of five funding organizations and thus 'open the black box of peer review' in the United States. Hopefully, this will enable us to take a small step forward towards a comparative sociology of evaluation (Lamont 2012) and provide new data for the study of value(s) (Graeber 2001).

Secondly, precisely because it is about prizes being awarded to *Japanese* pots, this article is one of just two accounts of prizes and awards taking place *outside* the United States and Europe (the other also being about Japan [Mack 2004]). This allows us to take into consideration the possibility of cultural differences in the social processes of jurying, as well as in the evaluation criteria applied, and so to provide a more nuanced – and, once more, comparative – understanding of theoretical arguments about prizes and awards made hitherto.

The Art World of Contemporary Japanese Ceramics

When I conducted fieldwork among those constituting the art world of contemporary Japanese ceramics, my aim was to learn how a potter (and by implication, other Japanese craftsman) might be awarded one or other of the highest accolades available to craftsmen in Japan: holder of an Important Intangible Cultural Property (*jūyō mukei bunkazai*), on the one hand, or the Award of Cultural Merit (*bunka kunshō*), on the other. What I learned was, on the surface at least, simply put: it was through exhibiting his or her work that a potter (*yakimon'zukuri*) came to be accepted as 'ceramic artist' (*tōgei sakka*), and by selling that work and winning prizes at exhibitions that s/he might eventually receive one of the accolades in question.

One of the peculiarities of the art-craft world in Japan in the post-war period has been that department stores, rather than museums of art, have been the sites of

exhibition, and thus of the consecration, of (ceramic) art (Havens 1982). This has had much to do with stores' strategies of using cultural events to attract customers and with the fact that pottery *sold*. Another feature has been the presence of media organizations, but in particular of national newspaper companies, as cultural sponsors of major exhibitions (Asano 1981) – again, in a bid to attract readers and increase sales. Precisely because the legitimacy of such cultural activities could only be assured if they called upon the services of experts in the field of ceramics, newspaper companies and department stores established (at times somewhat less than holy) alliances with museum curators and academics (scholars in the fields of ceramics, art, craft, and the histories thereof). These 'critics' (*hyōronka*) thus came to constitute a third and powerful force in the public delineation of what constitutes 'ceramic art' in contemporary Japanese society. It has been within this tripartite structure of critics, newspaper companies and department stores that potters who wish to become 'ceramic artists' have had to position themselves and manoeuvre in order to work their way to the top. In other words, in order to receive public recognition, a potter needs to be master not only of ceramic techniques and 'creative flair', but also of social skills (Moeran 1987).²

Ceramics exhibitions can be neatly divided into one-man and, less frequently, group shows, on the one hand, and, on the other, competitive exhibitions which are juried and have prizes attached. While the informal hierarchy of department stores, based on location (Tokyo vis-à-vis other cities in Japan), sales potential, clientele, and prestige (based on an amalgam of sales and other 'cultural' factors, such as history and past cultural activities), has had a major influence on potters' strategies regarding where and when to hold their one-man shows, competitive exhibitions – like medieval fairs (Allix 1922: 540; Braudel 1992: 92) and contemporary trade fairs (Moeran and Strandgaard Pedersen 2011: 4-5) – have formed a mutually dependent 'network' or 'circuit' in terms of their content, geographical location, and timing. In this sense, they constitute a national 'geography of prestige', which, unlike the international scene described by English (2005: 264-96), is *not* deterritorialized for there is a careful structuring of both national and regional ceramics exhibitions within Japan. For example, the Western Crafts Exhibition (*Seibu Kōgeiten*; Asahi Newspaper), for craftsmen and women working in Kyushu, is held at Tamaya Department Store in Fukuoka in early June, in anticipation of the national-level Traditional Crafts Exhibition (*Dentō Kōgeiten*) held at Mitsukoshi Department Store in Tokyo in late September. At the same time, it positions itself vis-à-vis other regional ceramics exhibitions held at other department stores in northern Kyushu in the spring and summer months. It also positions itself vis-à-vis other national exhibitions sponsored by other newspapers in different parts of the country for other regional groups of potters (for example, the National Ceramics Exhibition held in a Nagoya department store). Among the latter group is the Japan Ceramic Art Exhibition (*Nihon Tōgeiten*; Mainichi Newspaper) held at Daimaru Department Store in Tokyo every other June.³ It is to this that we shall now turn.

The Japan Ceramic Art Exhibition

The Japan Ceramic Art Exhibition (JCAE) is a juried exhibition sponsored by the Mainichi Newspaper Company and, at the time of my research, held every other year in June at the Tokyo branch of the Daimaru Department Store. It was then taken to other Daimaru store branches (in Osaka and, later in the year, Kobe), as well as to other department stores such as Tamaya in Kokura, Kyushu, and Meitetsu in Nagoya. The

exhibition was first held in 1971 when, in order to celebrate the centenary of its foundation, the Mainichi Newspaper Company ‘upgraded’ a local exhibition that it had sponsored in the western part of Japan to a national exhibition of ceramics. In its early years the exhibition was taken abroad, but since 1977 it has remained in Japan as a primarily ‘Japanese’ ceramics exhibition, although foreign potters resident in Japan are allowed to send in their contributions.⁴

The JCAE has an Executive Committee, chaired *ex officio* by the Chairman of the Japan Arts Association (*Nihon Geijutsu-in Inchō*) and consisting of five other members, of whom four served as jury members in 1981. Other judges included curators of well-known Japanese art and/or craft museums, as well as university professors (who had also often been museum curators in the past). Together they constituted three panels of jurors, each of which was assigned to judge submissions to one of the exhibition’s three sections: (1) the Traditional Section (*Dentō bumon*) for ‘individual traditional and creative works’ (*dentō oyobi sōsaku ni yoru ippin sakuhin*); (2) the Abstract Section (*zen’ei bumon*) for ‘free form *objets*’ (*jīyu na zōkei ni yoru obuje*); and (3) the Functional Pottery Section (*jitsuyō tōki bumon*) for ‘folk art, craft, and mass-produced pottery’ (*mingei, kurafuto, ryōsan tōki*).⁵ In addition, in order to ensure that the exhibition appealed to the general public, and reached what the exhibition organizer referred to as ‘a certain minimum standard of quality’, up to a dozen potters, who had already attained the highest level of recognition, were invited (*shōtai*) to submit their work for exhibition, while 50-60 more were ‘recommended’ (*suisen*). The pots of both groups automatically qualified for exhibition and were eligible for its prizes.

In the ten years prior to my research, submissions had increased from 740 pots in 1971 to just under 1,200 ten years later. By far the greatest number of submissions (810 in 1979) was to the Tradition Section, of which only 130 were selected for exhibition. In both 1979 and 1981, the JCAE consisted of a total of 238 pots (including the 62-4 invited and recommended submissions), meaning that a potter submitting his work had a one in seven chance of having it accepted for exhibition in the JCAE.

Five prizes were awarded at the JCAE that year. Of these the Princess Chichibu Cup (*Chichibu no miya-hai*) was the most prestigious – both because of the size of the award (¥1 million) and of its association with a member of the Imperial Household.⁶ The other four prizes were worth ¥500,000 each.⁷ In order of perceived status ranking at the time, these were: the Foreign Minister’s Prize (*Gaimu Daijin-shō*); the Minister of Education’s Prize (*Monbu Daijin-shō*); the Mainichi Newspaper Company Prize (*Mainichi Shinbunsha-shō*); and the Japan Ceramic Art Exhibition Prize (*Nihon Tōgeiten-shō*).⁸

In 1981, as in previous years, submissions were solicited in the third week of April⁹ and jurying took place at the very end of the same month on the ninth floor of the Mainichi Newspaper’s headquarters overlooking the Imperial Palace grounds in Takebashi, Tokyo. Although large ceramics exhibitions often include practising potters, as well as critics, academics, and museum curators in their juries, the Mainichi Newspaper Company selected its judges from the latter group only, on the grounds that artist potters tended to form cliques and vote only for their own (former) apprentices and students. Critics, on the other hand, were seen to be generally less biased. Although the full jury consisted mostly of the same members over time, with one or two changes every other year, they were revolved biennially from one section to the next in order to create new combinations of personnel. This, it was reasoned, had the twofold effect of ensuring that critics, who tended to be specialists in one of the three styles of ceramics exhibited, did not form cabals and vote for their personal favourites, while also introducing some variety among the panellists. During the first decade of the exhibition,

five judges were assigned to each of the three sections, but in 1981 this number was increased to six for the very large Tradition Section. However, owing to withdrawals and absences, each section ended up with four judges for the final awards that year, thereby breaking the golden rule that a jury panel should always consist of an odd number of panellists (Mathieu and Bertelsen 2013).

The Selection Process

Jurying of the JCAE took place over two days, and consisted of two primary activities: selection and prize awarding. The selection process took the whole of one long day and involved a three-stage winnowing of the approximately 1200 submissions. First, individual jury members selected pots that they liked (168 out of more than 800 submissions for the Tradition Section, which I was observing). These were then brought five at a time to a table to be viewed by the section jury as a whole. Just under two thirds of the first-stage selections passed this second stage. However, since 130 pots were needed from the Tradition Section to make up the exhibition's final numbers,¹⁰ the judges were then asked to reconsider those pots that they had failed. During this third stage a few submissions that had been totally overlooked in both the first and second stages of selection were picked out and passed by jury members.

The selection process involved two other sets of people, apart from the judges (and the ethnographer): half a dozen employees of the art transport company which managed submissions and logistics at selected cities around Japan; and the Exhibition Administrator, a full-time employee of the Mainichi Newspaper Company, who – together with a team of three female employees – arranged and oversaw all activities connected with the JCAE, including submissions, jurying, exhibition set-up, catalogue preparation and printing, prize-giving ceremony, press relations, and so on and so forth. The Exhibition Administrator did not interfere in the actual selection of submissions, but since he represented his organization's interest in displaying as 'good' and 'broad based' an exhibition as possible for the general public, he did twice advise panellists on their selections along these lines (cf. Lamont 2009: 29, 43-5).

One incident during this lengthy selection process deserves mention, since it had a bearing on the prize-awarding process on the following day. Because they had few submissions to judge in the first place, and because they had selected even fewer for exhibition, the chairman of the Functional Pottery Section panel (Imai)¹¹ requested that one of the submissions selected by the Tradition Section panel (a set of small bowls) be transferred to his section. Although the potter himself, when consulted on the telephone, initially objected to this arrangement (he thought his work was being categorized as 'folk art'), one of the judges who knew him (Murata) personally persuaded him to accept the two jury panels' arrangement, and the submission was duly transferred from the Tradition to Functional Pottery Section.

The Prize Awarding Process

Once all three sections' submissions had been juried and the required number of pots selected, the Exhibition Administrator asked the Tradition Section's judges to select six pots that they considered of prize-winning quality. After minimal consultation, jury members agreed that each should pick out as many pots as he wished from among the 122 that they had selected and that they would then vote on them all together.

Jury members then picked out 21 pots in all. Then they were each handed five voting slips which they placed on, in, or beside those pots that they liked. In this first

round of voting, six of the 21 pots received no votes at all, one got three votes, three got two, and the rest (eleven) got one vote each. The pots were rearranged according to the number of votes received, and the Exhibition Administrator handed each of the judges four slips of paper. This time, five pots got two votes, one three votes, and the rest one vote or none at all. This enabled the Exhibition Administrator (who, remember, required six pots in all) to suggest that the six pots with two or more votes be put forward from the Tradition Section as candidates for the Princess Chichibu Cup to be decided on the following day. They would be joined by three from the Abstract, and four from the Functional Pottery, sections; as well as by six more pots which had to be selected from the Invited and Recommended Section. This was quickly accepted by all four judges.

On the following afternoon, eleven jurors assembled to select the pots that they judged to be the 'best' in that year's JCAE. They were first addressed by the Exhibition Administrator who laid out the procedure for deciding the award of the Princess Chichibu Cup. They were first to select potential prize-winning pots from the invited and recommended submissions. Would they prefer two votes each for this, or three?

The jury members decided that were in favour of three to start with. They then looked at the invited submissions, touching some and picking up others to examine them more closely. Some of the judges (from the same section) went around in pairs and chatted to each other as they looked at what was on display; most worked independently. Two were extremely quick in making up their minds about which pots to vote for and finished within two and three minutes respectively; others took a good quarter of an hour to cast their votes.

Once the Exhibition Administrator had received all the voting slips, he handed them to one of his female colleagues who read out their numbers one by one. Four pots ended up with three votes; six with two; nine with one; and 41 with none at all. The Exhibition Administrator again addressed the judges and asked them whether they wished to limit themselves to those pots with three votes in the next round of voting, or to include all those that had been voted for at least once. At the suggestion of the Chairman of the Abstract Section panel (Kitano, in his mid-60s), the single-vote pots were reviewed to ensure that all jury members were satisfied that they be discarded. Since there was no dissent as each was held up by one of the art transport company employees, all nine single-voted pots were removed from further voting and placed under the tables.

The judges were then asked to vote again with three voting slips. The process was much quicker this time, but, just as the Exhibition Administrator had more or less finished reading out which numbered pot had garnered how many votes, the hitherto absent Chairman of the Jury (Tanabe) entered the room with an apology and was asked to vote. This he did. In this second round, two pots garnered six votes apiece; one five; and two four, with the remaining having three votes or fewer.

This pattern made it comparatively simple for Tanabe, as Chairman of the Jury, to suggest that the five pots with four votes or more be selected to compete with the pots from the other sections for the Princess Chichibu Cup. This was agreed without further ado, and the art transport employees proceeded to place all the sections' pre-selected prize-candidate pots on the tables together with those just selected. New numbers were placed beside each pot, and these were recorded, as diligently as ever, by the three female Mainichi Newspaper employees.

Round 1 of voting proper got under way, with each jury member given three voting slips and the results read out as previously (*see Table*). Together, the Exhibition

Administrator and the judges fairly promptly agreed that those pots with three votes and over should remain in the running. The rest were removed as the judges proceeded to Round 2, this time with only two votes apiece (a number determined by the Exhibition Administrator). The results led to some discussion. Tanabe asked his colleagues whether they should make the cut at three, or four, votes. Imai suggested that they might perhaps give the prize to the outright winner, Number 6, which had five votes. Kitano and one or two other jury members thought not, since there was only a single vote difference between Number 6 and three other pots (which, conveniently, belonged to each of the three different sections). It was therefore agreed that they should make the cut at four votes.

Table: Voting Patterns for the Princess Chichibu Cup at the JCAE

| Section | Potter | Pre 1 | Pre 2 | Main 1 | Main 2 | Main 3 | Main 4 | Main 5 |
|---------------------|---------------|--------------|--------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| Invited | 1 | 2 | 6 | 3 | 2 | | | |
| | 2 | 3 | 2 | | | | | |
| | 3 | 2 | 1 | | | | | |
| | 4 | 2 | 3 | | | | | |
| | 5 | 2 | 3 | | | | | |
| | 6 | 3 | 5 | 4 | 5 | 4 | 4 | 6 |
| | 7 | 2 | 4 | 1 | | | | |
| | 8 | 2 | 2 | | | | | |
| | 9 | 3 | 6 | 1 | | | | |
| | 10 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 3 | | | |
| Tradition | 11 | | | 2 | | | | |
| | 12 | | | 4 | 4 | 2 | | |
| | 13 | | | 1 | | | | |
| | 14 | | | 2 | | | | |
| | 15 | | | 1 | | | | |
| | 16 | | | 1 | | | | |
| Functional | 17 | | | 3 | 4 | 3 | 4 +1 | |
| | 18 | | | 0 | | | | |
| | 19 | | | 0 | | | | |
| | 20 | | | 2 | | | | |
| Abstract | 21 | | | 1 | | | | |
| | 22 | | | 3 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 6 |
| | 23 | | | 3 | 2 | | | |
| Voting slips | | 3 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 |

In Round 3, the Exhibition Administrator allowed each jury member just one vote. As a result, Number 6 again came out as the ‘winner’, with four votes, but two other submissions had three votes each. Tanabe once again addressed his colleagues.

‘This is not very satisfactory. There isn’t very much difference in our votes for the four remaining pots. What should we do? It is really rather uncomfortable (*guai ga warui*) not getting a proper majority for one pot. But maybe, at this point, we should remove Number 12 since it got only two votes, and vote on the remaining three?’

This suggestion was agreed to without dissent and the jury members moved to Round 4 with a single vote apiece for the remaining three pots. As the Exhibition Administrator

read out the results and worriedly proclaimed a dead heat, there was a lot of laughter among the panellists. One of them, Hayashi (in his late 50s), suggested lightly that they settle the issue with a *janken* (scissors-stone-paper) solution.

At this point, the Exhibition Administrator suddenly remembered that one of the jury members from the Functional Section, who was unable to be present that day, had left a sealed envelope with his written vote for the Princess Chichibu Cup before going home the previous evening. He asked permission to open the envelope, and the jury members' expectant silence permitted him to proceed.

Now, it was clear that the odds on the absent jury member having voted for one of the three pots still in contention at the end of Round 4 were rather slim. After all, the judges had had to select half a dozen pots from among the invited submissions, and then to choose once more from among the 23 pots put forward in total. The Exhibition Administrator tore open the envelope, took out a slip of paper, and read aloud: 'Number 1634'.

This caused some confusion since the absent judge had written down the original submission number. This was checked against the records fastidiously kept by the Mainichi Newspaper employees, one of whom informed those present that Number 1634 was now Number 17. The absent judge's vote appeared to have broken the deadlock.

Or had it? Imai immediately stood up to address his colleagues:

'I have been in charge of the third section, which this year has had its title changed from *Mingei* Folk Art to Functional Pottery or Craft. In this respect, it can be said to be a new section in the Japan Ceramic Art Exhibition, and it would, perhaps, not be appropriate *this* year to award the overall prize to a pot from this section. A second point that needs to be made is that Number 17 was not originally submitted to the Functional Pottery, but to the Tradition, section. It was transferred at the request of the judges of the Functional Pottery panel, of which I am Chairman, on the grounds that the section lacked good quality submissions. The potter himself, however, initially objected to this, although this objection was overcome, thanks to the intervention earlier this afternoon of Murata *sensei*,' he indicated a member of the Tradition Section panel. 'The question arises, however: would these dishes have been picked out as prize-worthy if they had remained in the Tradition Section? I myself, as Chairman of the Functional Pottery Section, would have no objection if it was decided *not* to give the Princess Chichibu Cup to Number 17. I should add in this respect, perhaps, that I myself have been voting for Number 6.'

Murata (Tradition Section): 'Does this mean that we are to forget Number 17 entirely?'

Imai: 'No. No, not at all. It is just an issue of whether we should award the main prize to a new section in the exhibition.'

Tanabe and Kitano got up to examine the remaining three pots more closely while the discussion continued:

Hayashi (Tradition Section): 'We have to ask ourselves, though, whether Number 17 is really the very best pot submitted to the exhibition this year – one that reveals the uniqueness of Japanese ceramics (*Nihon tōgei no yuniku-sa*). Yes, it is quite charming (this word in English), but what about its merits *technically* speaking?'

Judge A (Functional Pottery Section): 'Number 17 can always get another prize, so we don't *have* to give it the best prize of all now.'

Judge B (Functional Pottery Section): 'Number 17 is a bit on the expensive side for everyday functional craftwork, isn't it? These dishes seem a bit borderline in terms of their price.'

Hayashi: 'Frankly, I think the pot is a bit weak (*yowai*) for an absolute overall prize (*zettaishō*). It probably wouldn't have been selected if it had remained in the Tradition Section.'

Imai: 'I suggest, then, that Number 17 be put aside.'

Judge A: 'I agree.'

Tanabe (Tradition Section – now returned from the table where the three pots were standing): 'I've now had a good look at those dishes. And I must say that they are full of defects and have too many weak points. I suggest that we agree to *Imai sensei's* proposal.'

So Number 17 was removed from the table. The judges were then asked once again to cast one vote for one of the two remaining pots. This they did, only for there to be another dead heat. If only the thirteenth judge had been present!

This time the laughter among the panellists was tinged with embarrassment. *Tanabe* asked that the names of the potters who had made the two remaining submissions be identified: Number 6 was by *Imaizumi Imaemon*, a thirteenth generation potter living and working in *Arita*, Japan's oldest porcelain manufacturing centre in *Kyushu*; Number 22 by an unknown potter.

Hayashi suggested that *Tanabe*, as Chairman of the Jury, make a decision. So the old man stood to address his colleagues once again.

'We have here two pots – one by an invited artist and the other by a potter virtually unknown to us. Personally, I have to say that I don't actually think very much of the *Imaemon* pot submitted to this exhibition and standing on the table in front of you. And I'm sure that there are several among you who will agree with me on this point. *Imaemon* has certainly produced better work.' *Tanabe* turned towards the Exhibition Organizer. 'But who is Number 22 exactly?'

One of the *Mainichi* employees handed her boss a file, pointing to a particular page.

Exhibition Administrator: 'Born 1945, in the *Tōhoku* region. Currently employed as a school teacher. No previous submissions to the Japan Ceramic Art Exhibition. In fact, no record at all of participation in any exhibition that we know of.'

Tanabe: 'Well, his work is certainly very good. But then I suppose one might argue that this type of three-layered clay abstract design is not in itself a particularly *original* (*dokutoku*) idea. Certainly, a number of people have tried it before... So, if one is to take the notion of *tradition* into account, one has no option but to go back to *Imaemon's* submission. We're talking about a 13th generation potter specialising in enamel overglaze porcelain ware. Still, I think it necessary that we have a good discussion at this point, if only because *Imaemon can* produce better work. On the other hand, in Number 22, we have the work of a completely unknown potter. If we choose the latter for the *Princess Chichibu Cup*, we'll be attaching a lot of *meaning* (*ōki na imi*) to it and giving the potter quite a reputation.'

Imai: 'Actually, I think that *Imaemon's* vase is rather good. It is in a new style, as you can see.'

At this point, *Tanabe* asked that the vase be brought over for closer examination.

Hayashi: 'We should, perhaps, not forget that *Imaemon* nearly got the *Princess Chichibu Cup* four years ago.'

Imai: 'And he made *this* vase, unlike many artist potters who get their apprentices to do the work for them.'

Tanabe (with a laugh): 'Well, one has to consider whether Her Imperial Highness would like to have her name associated with an abstract lump of clay made by an unknown school teacher, or with a nice porcelain vase by a very famous artist potter. We all know which she'd prefer! So what I suggest is that we wait to see how Number 22 progresses in the future and then award him a major prize when a suitable occasion occurs.'

This was met with general murmurs of assent and handclaps on the part of the assembled judges. The overglaze enamel porcelain bowl by Imaizumi Imaemon XIII had won the Princess Chichibu Cup!

Commentary

Given that some of my readers may have come to the conclusion that the JCAE judges acted somewhat cynically in 1981, I will add a few comments about the prize awarding process here described, on the basis of follow-up interviews with four judges and my overall research on the art world of contemporary Japanese ceramics. From this it will be seen that there was a good fit between judges' genuine inclinations, their designated roles, and their perceived opportunities for personal advancement over the longer term (English 2005: 122).

Firstly, the section panels and the jury as a whole tended to adhere to the opinions expressed by their chairmen, who themselves were appointed on the basis of seniority in the ceramic art world. Thus Tanabe, although retired, was a member of the prestigious Japan Academy of Arts (*Nihon Geijutsu-in kai'in*), while Imai was former curator of a well-known Kyoto art museum, of which Kitano was the current director. As a result, we find Judges A and B of the Functional Section agreeing with their panel chairman Imai's arguments for the removal of Number 17 (their own section's submission) at the end of the fourth round of voting.

But the relative seniority of each section's chairman also influenced the selection process. For example, the chairman of the Abstract Section panel, Kitano, remained silent and did not openly argue for the merits of Number 22 (an abstract work) when his predecessor, Imai, openly supported Number 6. This was, without doubt, a tactical move by the latter, who used his social position to avoid open disagreement with his opinion.

There was, then, an informal pecking order among jury members, based in large part upon pre-existing networks and reputations which were determined – as one would expect in Japanese society – by age and seniority. As Lamont (2009: 128) points out:

'It is impossible to eliminate the effect of interpersonal relationships, including clientelism, on the evaluation process. Nevertheless, panellists proceed as if they were free of these influences. Their individual preferences are usually construed in universalistic terms, despite the particularistic aspects introduced by real-world considerations'.

The 'universalistic terms' adopted by jury members were in large part framed as regional expertise in different styles of Japanese ceramics. One judge, for example, was extremely well-versed in abstract *objets* made, for the most part, by potters in the Kyoto area; another was an expert in tea wares made in Hagi; a third knew all there was to know about the potters of northern Kyushu; a fourth, who had been born in the pottery

town of Tokoname, was *au courant* with work coming from there and the neighbouring regions of Mino and Seto. As a result, pottery exhibitions like the JCAE tended to reproduce jury members' tastes, and in so doing amplify, their authority and so affect indirectly the overall development of contemporary Japanese ceramics (Mack 2004: 317).

Secondly, in order to impose a sense of order on what may well have been evaluative randomness, informants said that in large part they voted for pots in their own sections throughout the voting process. If this were so, they would be conforming to standard sociological analysis that the primary allegiance of Japanese is to the 'in group' to which they belong (Nakane 1967). Certainly, this seems to have been the case with the absentee judge who voted for one of the pots in his own section. However, voting in the early rounds shows quite a broad distribution of votes outside the sections to which jury members were assigned. It was only later that a division of votes along section lines may have taken place, although anomalies prevailed. An obvious cross-over was Imai, who admitted his support for Number 6, rather than Number 17, in Round 3. Also, Murata (who, it will be recalled, had volunteered to telephone the potter concerned when his work was transferred to the Functional Pottery Section) almost certainly voted for Number 17, rather than Number 12 in his own Tradition Section, until it was withdrawn. Moreover, given that Number 6 would have been classified as a 'traditional' pot if it had been an ordinary and not recommended submission, one would have expected all four judges in the Tradition Section to vote for it in the final round. The fact that they did not do so suggests that jury members exercised a measure of independent aesthetic judgement throughout the jurying process, but that such judgement was also tempered by interpersonal relations that led to bloc voting based on alliances and schisms. In this respect, the fact that what people *say* they do is not the same as what they *actually* do provides *the* methodological rationale for anthropological fieldwork in the study of organizations and the people working therein.

Thirdly, what stands out from the ethnography described above is the fact that judges rarely gave voice to what may broadly be termed '*aesthetic*' criteria when arguing for or against a submission. This does not mean that they did not adhere to the kind of 'universalistic terms' discussed by Lamont. On other occasions, for example, they were more than prepared to discuss their conceptualizations of 'modern beauty' (*gendai no bi*) in relation to ceramics. However, the criteria then used (for example, *balance, vitality, originality, simplicity, clarity*, and so on) were not openly brought into play in the prize awarding process. Indeed aesthetic judgements were often expressed in negative, rather than in positive, terms (witness Hayashi's use of the English word 'charming', and judges' general aversion to pots that were 'weak' [*yowai*]). Even when Imai asserted that Imaemon's pot (Number 6) was 'in a new style', he did not explain, nor did his fellow jury members ask, in what this style consisted.¹² Rather, extra-aesthetic factors were brought into play in order to make an argument. Thus Imai put forward extended *procedural* reasons for not awarding the Princess Chichibu Cup to Number 17 at the end of Round 4, while Tanabe advocated the prestige associated with traditional Japanese porcelain and a member of the Imperial Household when delivering his *coup de grâce* on Number 22 at the end of Round 5.

What emerges from these considerations is that, in both the selection and prize-awarding processes, judges did not consider pots on their own merits, but invariably *in relation to* other pots. This was obvious in the selection process, when five pots at a time were brought to the table for the section jury's judgement, but also in the assessments at the end of each round of voting of individual pots which were candidates for the

Princess Chichibu Prize. In other words, jury members were intent not upon judging inherent qualities that would enable them to decide the 'best pot' in the exhibition, but upon finding a 'winning pot' that depended on *produced contrasts* (Mathieu and Bertelsen 2013). In this they faced the unenviable task of comparing 'incommensurate flaws' (Lamont 2009: 47). The fact that jury members were asked to award prizes on the basis of relative, rather than absolute, performance (Nelson et al. 2001: 14) underlines the fact that competitive exhibitions like the JCAE are tournaments during which different sets of values come into play in deciding the winner (Moeran 2010; Moeran and Strandgaard Pedersen 2011: 9-16).

Theoretical Implications

What theoretical implications, then, are to be drawn from this ethnographic account of selection and prize awarding processes for the JCAE?

Firstly, while awards and prizes can only be bestowed by others, *who* those others are, for the most part, has not been taken into account by scholars who tend to distinguish rather simply between 'those who give awards, those who receive them, and the audiences that observe these exchanges' (Best 2008: 7). For example, the Nobel Prizes are bestowed by the Nobel Foundation on individuals who have made outstanding contributions to medicine, the sciences, literature, peace, and so on. But these individuals are selected by a prize committee consisting of members of the prestigious Swedish Academy which, together with the Nobel Foundation, works to ensure that the right decision is made. We need to look more closely, therefore, at *who*, constitutes this kind of committee, and what its relationship is with the organization on whose behalf it functions.

In the JCAE, as we have seen, prizes are awarded by a panel of judges selected from among, and thus representing the interests of, Japan's art and educational institutions. These judges are deemed to have the expertise that the organizers of the exhibition – the Mainichi Newspaper Company and Daimaru Department Store – themselves lack. It is they who matter, being absolutely essential on two counts: firstly, they select and then reward contributions to an exhibition; secondly, by so doing, they directly influence the exhibition's credibility in the eyes of its public (Goode 1979: 152). In these respects, they link production to consumption and thus perform a crucial structural role in the manufacture and reception of 'taste' (English 2002: 116). The honour of being asked to serve on a jury, even though dismissed by judges themselves as burdensome, reproduces the power of the jury and reminds readers of its members' importance and centrality in the field of Japanese ceramics (cf. Mack 2004: 293).

At the same time, the judges serve the organization which 'owns' the prizes that they allocate. In this respect, their role is symbolic, rather than structural, so that judges are not unlike those who initiate a *kula* exchange path in the islands of the Western Pacific (Malinowski 1922). They have the power to *circulate* awards, the ownership of which, however, remains elsewhere (Godelier 2004: 15). Who, then, *owns* the prizes? Ostensibly, it is the bestowing organization, the Mainichi Newspaper Company. But the latter itself does not own all of the prizes that *it* allocates, since only one of the prizes bestowed bears the newspaper's name, and another that of the exhibition itself. The other prizes bear the names of *other* persons – Princess Chichibu, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, and the Minister of Culture – who have lent their names, and the names of their organizations, to the exhibition and the bestowing organization. That all those concerned were very aware of this was made clear when the panel of judges, finding itself at an impasse after the final round of voting, discussed which of the two extant

pots her Imperial Highness might like to have her name associated with. So, the Mainichi Newspaper Company itself holds some of its prizes in trust. In this respect, its symbolic position is no different from that of the panel of judges that it employs. By linking symbolically the national production of ceramics to the Imperial Household and Japanese Government (as well as to itself, a media organization), it reinforces the cultural institutions of art and education represented by the panel of judges. As its title implies, the JCAE 'consecrates' *Japan*, Japanese *ceramics*, and an *exhibition* culture.

Secondly, unlike the film jurying and peer review processes described by Mathieu and Bertelsen (2013) and Lamont (2009) respectively, the JCAE prize awarding process was remarkably *a-linguistic*. In academic peer reviewing, as in film and book jurying, panellists use language to assess and evaluate proposals, films and books, which themselves use language as a, or the, primary form of expression and communication. Panellists may argue points, listen to counter-arguments, and agree or disagree with fellow panellists on the basis of opinions expressed about the products before them. Pots, however, like all other kinds of artwork, use form, colour, and pattern/design – not language – as their primary means of communication. Panellists, therefore, must first evaluate them in terms other than by means of language, which is then used to interpret sensations and emotions induced by the physical form of the pot or artwork in question. Such sensations are independent of, and cannot be tied down by, language. As a result, they are resistant both to consistent and universalistic standards (of beauty), and thus to mutual understanding and agreement in their own terms, and so allow other criteria – such as inter-personal relations – to sway deliberations among panellists.

Nevertheless, thirdly, the 'central rules of deliberation' outlined by Lamont (2009: 116-20) appear to hold good for the jurying of Japanese ceramics, so that comparison may be made across both cultural boundaries and product ranges. A standard of reciprocity prevailed among judges who were disposed towards producing a consensual decision and thus realizing the common good, even though their attempts at persuasion tended to be along procedural rather than aesthetic lines and did not provide 'opportunity for full and equal voice' (Lamont 2009: 117) because of age and interpersonal relations. It was *personal* deference and respect, therefore, rather than deference for expertise and respect of disciplinary sovereignty (p. 119), that gave rise to collegiality and provided 'the oil that keeps the wheels of deliberation turning when panellists otherwise might not be willing to accommodate one another' (Lamont 2009: 120).

Finally, as an act of consecration, the JCAE has had to fulfil four conditions: (1) the organization awarding the honour (the Mainichi Newspaper Company) has to have cultural authority; (2) it also has to adhere to rigorous procedures when selecting prize recipients; (3) the main award (the Princess Chichibu Cup) needs to be selective, in the sense that only a very small proportion of potential recipients can receive it; and, crucially, (4) the organization should be able to identify objective differences that clearly demarcate potters and pots that are consecrated from those that are not (Allen and Parson 2006: 810-11).

Now, as with the baseball Hall of Fame analysed by Allen and Parsons, the JCAE meets the first three criteria, but falls short on the fourth. By their voting patterns, it was clear that jury members could not identify objective differences that would mark off one pot from its competitors and so make it obviously worthy of the Princess Chichibu Cup on the basis of agreed 'merit'. As a result, other criteria had to be brought into play in order to justify final selection of Imaemon's submission. In this respect, the jurying process did *not* assert that personalistic ties or prior judgements were

irrelevant, as claimed by Goode (1978: 154). Rather, the fact that judges made it their business to be aware of who had submitted what and often made their selections on the basis of personal ties (based on long-term 'loyalty') encouraged neither fairness in jurying, nor the necessary transformation of contestants into strangers, in order to allow their work to be judged on a level playing field (Goode 1978: 154).

Nevertheless, at the same time, ceramics exhibition awards do offer a basis for judgements about possible future achievement (Goode 1978: 164). Being awarded the Princess Chichibu Cup has tended to have further consequences in terms of 'cumulative recognition' – or 'winner takes all' syndrome (English 2005: 334-45) – for those concerned. Of the 21 winners of the prize since the inception of the JCAE, four (including Imaemon) have since been designated the holders of Important Intangible Cultural Properties. The 'meritocratic principles' invoked in the jurying process, therefore, are seemingly justified and reinforced by the later bestowal of the highest award possible to a potter in Japan. This in turn legitimizes the JCAE itself, together with its jurying process, judges, prize bestowers, and sponsoring organization.

The fact that the fourth condition – the identification of objective difference and accompanying clear demarcation of consecrated from non-consecrated – was *not* met in the ethnographic case outlined here explains, perhaps, why it is so difficult for scholars to study jurying processes *in situ*. Those who hand out awards and prizes *must* keep the processes of consecration secret in a black box if they are to maintain the legitimacy of those in whose trust they are placed. Otherwise it will become clear that the Emperor, while not entirely without clothes, may be somewhat improperly dressed for the occasion.

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Notes

¹ This article is based on fifteen months' fieldwork in Japan's ceramics art world in 1981-82 (Moeran 1987), and builds upon my earlier two year doctoral fieldwork on Japanese folk art pottery (Moeran 1997). During this time, I talked to dozens of potters, critics, museum curators, art historians, department store representatives, gallery owners, and auctioneers, with the simple (?) aim of finding out how a 'National Treasure' came to be appointed as such. I attended numerous ceramics exhibitions, as well as observed their preparations, and even held my own one-man show in a department store in northern Kyushu (Moeran 2012). In addition to the results of participant observation described here, I was given a lot of second-hand information, by both critics and potters who had been present in juries, about prize-awarding processes in other competitive exhibitions.

² The fact that such social manoeuvrings, by all informants' accounts, led to various forms of 'bribery' made publication of my research findings problematic. I have decided, however, to adopt a '30 year rule' of confidentiality and now open up my fieldnotes and materials for scholarly scrutiny.

³ It should be recognized that these exhibitions constituted the 'network' in 1981, and that several changes have taken place since then. The Asahi Ceramics Exhibition (*Asahi Tōgeiten*), for example, came to an end after its 41st showing, in 2004.

⁴ In all, about a dozen foreign potters, working in such pottery centres as Mashiko, Shigaraki and Bizen, used to submit their work.

⁵ In 1981, the Functional Pottery Section replaced the former Folk Arts Section (*mingei bumon*) which had been receiving fewer and fewer submissions in previous years. By including the word 'craft' in its description, the organizers hoped to boost potters' interest in this third section of the exhibition.

⁶ At the time of my research, Chichibu no Miya (Princess Chichibu) was the sister-in-law of then Emperor Shōwa (Hirohito), and an *aficionado* of pottery which she was reputed to make in her spare time at the Imperial family's residence in Gotemba. She was also Honorary Patron of the JCAE.

⁷ At that time, the exchange rate was approximately ¥120 to a US dollar.

⁸ The JCAE Prize was instituted in place of a prize originally sponsored by the Japan Foundation (*Kokusai Kōryū Kikin-shō*), which, for reasons unclear but connected with the fact that the exhibition no longer travelled abroad, withdrew its support in 1979. Further changes have since occurred in the allocation of prizes, as well as in their naming and number. From the 13th exhibition in 1995, the first prize has been split, between the *Chichibu no Miya-hai* and the runner-up *Nihon Tōgeiten-shō*. In 1987, the *Gaimu Daijin-shō* was withdrawn, and replaced by two *Mainichi Shinbunsha-shō*, prizes, and ten years later the *Monbu Daijin Prize* was lessened in importance to an 'encouragement' prize (*Monbu Daijin Shōrei-shō*). In 2005, however, the last reverted to its original status with a change of ministry name (*Monbu Kagaku Daijin-shō*). In 2009, three 'special' prizes were added to the list of awards.

⁹ Potters were charged a processing fee of ¥4,000 a pot, together with transportation charges.

¹⁰ A grand total of about 240 pots was judged appropriate for the space set aside for the JCAE by the Tokyo branch of Daimaru Department Store.

¹¹ In order to preserve their anonymity, I have given fictitious names to all individual judges mentioned here.

¹² Some weeks later, Murata explained what Imai was hinting at when he told me how Imaemon had changed the blue *dami* underwash on the vase to charcoal grey and had painted a standard, traditional design of flowers pink, rather than red. This was, in Murata's words, 'stretching tradition to the limit'.