Cultural texts do not simply reflect history, they make history and are part of its processes and practices and should, therefore, be studied for the (ideological) work that they do, rather than the (ideological) work (always happening elsewhere) that they reflect.1

Introduction

This chapter introduces the grand master system, *iemoto seido*. A general definition of the *iemoto seido* is followed by a survey of how the *iemoto seido* is represented in Japanese popular culture. The figure of the *iemoto* is seen to be present in flower arranging, the comic story-telling tradition of *rakugo*, and the Japanese dance form of *nihon buyō*. The Kawabata Yasunari novel, *Thousand Cranes*, is examined in the light of the Kawabata comment that it was intended to critique the excesses of Japanese tea culture.

Historical background of the Grand Master system

The *iemoto seido* is a device that sustains the transmission of a variety of Japanese cultural practices. The characteristic features and rights are concisely defined by the Gerald Groemer translation of Nishiyama Matsunosuke:

This system comprises a hierarchical, guildlike structure in which a fictitious household (*ie*) is organized so that the *iemoto* (the head of the *ie*) takes
both responsibility and credit for transmitting to disciples the orthodox form of the house tradition. The position (and name) of the iemoto tend to be hereditary. When no son or daughter (real or adopted) is available, the best or most powerful disciple may be awarded the post. The process of transmitting an art within the iemoto system is usually a form of training that appeals primarily to direct experience and praxis. Transmission often involves a certain degree of secrecy, but students who after a period of apprenticeship have attained the appropriate rank (and paid the appropriate fees) may take on their own pupils and continue to pass on the art. The iemoto, however, continues to control the tradition by reserving the following rights:

1. Rights regarding the art – for example, the right to secrecy, the right to allow or prohibit performances, rights over the repertoire or the set forms (kata) of an art.
2. Rights concerning the teaching, transmission, and licensing of the art.
3. The right to expel or punish members of the school.
4. The right to dispose of costumes, ranks (pseudonyms) and the like.
5. The right to control equipment or properties used in the art.
6. Exclusive rights to the income resulting from the preceding five items. Since the Meiji period this right has included the copyright of all musical scores, no texts, textbooks, scholarly writings, or journals issued by the school or family.²

Nishiyama identifies three origins of the grand master system: the patterned network of relationships that emerged from the house traditions of warrior families; temple-based arrangements designed to associate certain practices with a particular family brand; and those family-based operations that existed to profit from the transmission of a particular tradition.³ Nishiyama notes that during the Edo period, because of these various points of origin, several terms were used to designate what we would now call the iemoto system. Nishiyama cites the first documented appearance of the word iemoto in 1757.

Urbanization was one social condition necessary for the expansion of this third type of family-based operation. The concentration of a literate population in Edo, with their disposable income and a need to display learning as conspicuous consumption, gave rise to an astonishing range of leisure activities across a wide range of socio-economic levels.⁴ Herbert Plutschow identifies the political importance of these family business modes of transmission: