

ENCYCLOPEDIA OF CONTEMPORARY JAPANESE CULTURE (NY: ROUTLEDGE, 2002)

mingei 313

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SANDRA BUCKLEY

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Chisso Corporation
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mercury as the cause.
Nihon Chisso Hiryō
theories. Researchers

confirmed in 1961 that the organic mercury was
created inside the factory in the production process
for acetaldehyde, but only after Chisso stopped
using mercury in 1968 did the government
officially conclude that Chisso's mercury caused
the disease.

Victims' demands for compensation have re-
sulted in three so-called 'final and complete'
solutions to the Minamata disease issue. In 1959,
Chisso agreed to make 'sympathy payments' to
patients, in return for a ban on further demands,
even if the company's waste was proven to be the
cause. Prior to this, Chisso's own secret experi-
ments had proven that its mercury was the cause.
Chisso also installed waste treatment equipment,
but did not announce that it did not remove
mercury.

In the late 1960s, as activist citizens' groups
appeared nationwide and another outbreak of
Minamata disease occurred near a factory in
Niigata Prefecture, Minamata came to national
attention. In 1973, after victims won their lawsuit,
Chisso accepted legal responsibility and began
paying reasonable compensation to those certified
by the government as Minamata disease victims.
By 1999, 2,262 victims had been certified. Court
cases continued after 1973 over certification and
government responsibility, while government loans
kept Chisso alive and able to continue making
compensation payments. A government-brokered
agreement implemented in 1996 had compensated
11,152 uncertified victims by 1999, but only in
return for promises never to apply for certification
or sue the government. Nevertheless, this was likely
to be the last 'solution' to the Minamata disease
issue, since the average age of patients was in the
late seventies.

The most heavily polluted areas of Minamata
Bay were dredged in the 1980s, largely at Chisso's
expense. In 1997, Kumamoto's governor declared
the fish in the bay safe, and the net that had
surrounded the bay since 1977 was removed.

Further reading

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TIMOTHY S. GEORGE

Minamata Series, the

Director Tsuchimoto Noriaki started his career
making educational and industrial films for the
high-growth economy at Iwanami Productions.
When he quit to make films independently, he
ended up at Minamata where the dimensions of
the mercury poisoning by Chisso Corporation were
only beginning to be understood. In a series of
powerful films Tsuchimoto carefully documented
how mercury entered the food chain and affected
the human body; this in the face of corporate and
governmental denials. As a whole, his series of
thirteen films charts the depth of the tragedy while
sensitively following the victims as they make sense
of their lives.

ABÉ MARK NORNES

mingei

Mingei refers both to articles produced by tradi-
tional craftspeople for everyday use and to the
movement to protect and promote such crafts,
which began in the 1920s and still continues today.
The term itself was coined in 1926 by Yanagi
Soetsu (Muneyoshi) (1889–1961) as an abbrevia-
tion of *minshū no kōgei* (crafts of the common people).
Both 'folk art' and 'folk craft' have been used as
English equivalents, but Yanagi himself preferred
the latter in order to distinguish *mingei* from works
of 'high art'. Typical *mingei* include: pottery, lacquer
ware, textiles, baskets, furniture and other house-
hold items, and Japanese paper (*washi*). Yanagi's