

INDEN-YA: Magic of Deerskin & Urushi Lacquer

By Toshimasa YOKOZAWA

A "noren" shop curtain with an Inden-ya logo

Photos: INDEN-YA

PHOTO 1

The financial and economic crisis, which is said to be the worst in a century, has hit the world since the collapse of major US brokerage Lehman Brothers in October 2008. But in Japan, time-honored companies which have been in business for more than 100 years number about 50,000 while 3,500 firms have lasted for more than 200 years. In contrast, the number of firms in business for more than 200 years is 1,500 in Germany and 300 in France. In Japan, as many as 19 companies have been in business for more than 1,000 years. This figure is the highest in the world. That is because Japan is called a corporate powerhouse hosting time-honored businesses. Why are there so many long-life firms in Japan? This article introduces such Japanese time-honored firms in a series of stories.

Secrets: Traditional Family System & Management Concept

(1) One of the secrets is Japan's traditional family system. In Europe and the United States, a family is a blood relationship and a business corporation is an organization linked with contracts. In Japan, people have placed top priority on the continuation and prosperity of their families and formed family groups comprising the head family and branch families. This has led to the formation of business groups to hand over business to the next generation.

Of course, there are many family-owned firms in the rest of Asia, Europe and the United States. But they give top priority to the prosperity of families and make much of blood and family relationships in management. In contrast, time-honored firms in Japan attach more importance to the continuation of families than to that of blood. Operators of those time-honored firms often accept human resources outside their blood relationship, such as husbands of their daughters or adopted sons, to make them their successors.

(2) Long-life firms have their own management philosophies that are effective for today's business management. Among such philosophies are *kakun* (family precepts) and *kaken* (family charters) that have been passed down in generations.

For example, major department store operator Daimaru Inc., which was founded in Kyoto as a dry goods store in 1717, is known for its 300-year-old family precept "*sengi-kari*" meaning that morality should come first and profit next. The precept urges merchants to prioritize *gi*, which means morality, righteousness, reasonability and rules, rather than *ri* or profit, reminding merchants that those who put *gi* before *ri* would eventually flourish. Noted business scholar Peter Drucker (1909-2005), in his 1954 work "*The Practice of Management*," wrote that the purpose of business is to create and keep customers and profits are the results. Since the Edo period (1603-1867) in Japan, the whole society had the belief that morality comes first and profit next.

Another well-known old business aphorism is the philosophy of "*sampo-yoshi*" (good on three sides), maintained by ancient merchants in the province of Omi (Shiga Prefecture today). It means a business should satisfy society in general as well as the seller and the buyer. Japanese trading giants Itochu Corp. and Marubeni Corp. are known as originating from descendants of Omi merchants. This "*sampo-yoshi*" precept is also true for today's business philosophies and ideas that call for corporations to improve employee satisfaction (ES), customer satisfaction (CS) and corporate social responsibility (CSR). In summing up, long-life firms in Japan have traditionally maintained their

Photos: INDEN-YA



PHOTO 2

Applying "urushi" (Japanese lacquer) to make patterns on deerskin



PHOTO 3

A "fusube" smoking process

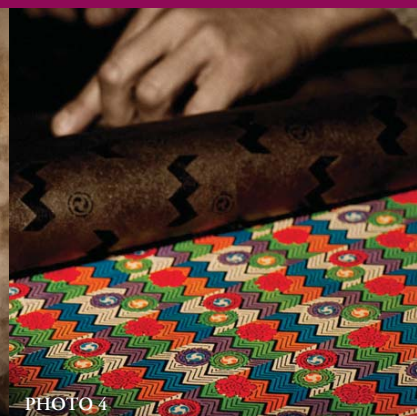
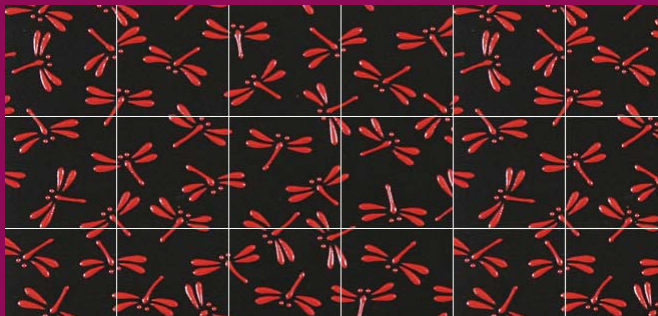


PHOTO 4

A pattern based on "sarasa" (calico) color dyeing

PHOTO 5



A "tombo" (dragonfly) pattern: often used for armor and outfits of "samurai" warriors

own business philosophies and ideas that are effective in today's business management. I think it is very important to make much of such basic business philosophies in order to overcome the ongoing global economic crisis.

Inden-ya Offers 400-year-old Traditional Leatherwork

<Origin & traditional techniques of inden>

Inden, a 400-year-old form of traditional leatherwork, was named so after foreigners presented ornamented leather products of Indian make to the Tokugawa *shogunate* government in the 1624-1643 Kanei era of the Edo period. Fascinated with their gorgeous colors, Japanese skilled workers began domestic production of these leather goods, which were called *inden* later. The word "in" derives from India and "den" means "coming from."

The company that makes such leatherwork is known as Inden-ya (Photo 1). Its business philosophy is human-first management placing top priority on skilled workers, material suppliers and buyers. Inden-ya employees are subject to retirement at the age of 60. But those aged over 60 are allowed to serve as long as their physical conditions allow them to work. Few old employees retire.

"Inden has been handed down as a family business. We will never relocate anywhere from here (Yamanashi Prefecture)," says the company. "We can flourish as long as we live here. Ghost towns emerge because residents move out into suburbs." Inden-ya makes much of links with the local community. In 2004, Shigeki Uehara assumed the 14th presidency of Inden-ya, succeeding his father Yushichi Uehara who became chairman.

Inden-ya is a time-honored maker, wholesaler and retailer of leather products. *Inden* is traditional leatherwork that has been passed down in Koshu, an old provincial name of Yamanashi Prefecture, over generations. Among *inden* leatherwork techniques passed down are (1) applying *urushi* (Japanese lacquer), or making patterns on deerskin with lacquer (Photo 2), (2) *fusube* smoking (Photo 3) and (3) *sarasa* (calico) color dyeing (Photo 4). These traditional techniques are applied to produce a variety of *inden* leather items, such as moneybags, handbags, belts, card holders, pouches and coin purses.

Notably, the *fusube* smoking technique, which was established during the reign of Emperor Suiko between 592 and 628, has been handed down only to Inden-ya. This technique, which is different from other ordinary ones, involves smoking deerskin with straw and pine resin smoke to dye patterns. The *fusube* technique is characteristic as smoking makes deerskin flexible and prevents it from turning hard when it gets wet. Products made with this technique are called *fusube* items. Only skilled workers can engineer the process of pasting deerskin onto an instrument called *taiko* and smoking it. *Fusube* products are

PHOTO 6

Photos: INDEN-YA



A coin purse made with an "urushi" lacquer technique

somewhat different from other ordinary *inden* leather products. This unique technique is seen only in Japan.

Portuguese missionary Luis Frois (1532-1597) was surprised at Japan's dyeing technique during his stay in Japan, writing that Europeans color the leather with dyes but that the Japanese ingeniously dye with smoke from straw.

<More than 400 years of history since its founding>

The company, officially known as Inden-ya Uehara Yushichi K.K., has a history of more than 400 years since its founding in 1582. Its heads have succeeded the name of Yushichi Uehara. Inden-ya's old documents and materials were burned during World War II. The Inden-ya store itself was also destroyed by fire in the war. After the war, the then head of Inden-ya resumed production, baseball gloves first, together with skilled workers who returned home after being demobilized. After the 12th head of Inden-ya died in 1955, Yushichi assumed the presidency at age 22. He is the current chairman.

He took charge of mainly production and his mother looked after sales as they shared responsibilities. They sold such items as seal-keeping pouches to peddlers and kept up the traditional business.

Yushichi came to a decision to abandon the tradition of handing the father's techniques to only one of his sons, a tradition known as "*isshi soden*," which had been kept up to the 13th head of Inden-ya. He disclosed the secrets of *inden* leatherwork to employees. He came to think that Inden-ya could not grow as a business unless its techniques are shared by the head and employees.

Inden-ya ranks top as an integrated manufacturer of leather products. With a market share of more than 90%, Inden-ya almost monopolizes the market of *inden* products in Japan. Inden-ya releases new products of novel design to the market steadily as part of efforts to spur demand from among the young generation.

Inden-ya's CSR Efforts for Town-building

Inden-ya has contributed much to local town-building efforts. In 1994, the firm organized a corporate union intended to establish a fashion town in Kofu, the capital of Yamanashi Prefecture. The Yamanashi prefectural and Kofu city governments have supported the project. In addition, Inden-ya has also sponsored local events such as speech contests and women's soccer competitions. It has the Inden Museum on the second floor of its headquarters in Kofu, putting Inden-ya's production techniques and history on display. **JS**

Toshimasa Yokozawa is professor, Faculty of Business Management, Asia University, Mushiashino City (a western Tokyo suburb).