

“Made in Japan”: from Textile Town to World

By Kozo MITSUZANE

Textile Town Kojima

Kojima in Kurashiki City, Okayama Prefecture, is famous across Japan as a textile town. About 70% of school uniforms for male students are produced in Kojima. In addition, it is thriving in the manufacture of uniforms for corporate employees. Also, Kojima is the birthplace of “Made in Japan” jeans, which have become the town’s flagship products. A variety of large and small sewn product manufacturers are in town. They used to get migrant workers from two main islands – Shikoku and Kyushu – but some have shifted their plants to overseas countries in recent years in search of low-cost labor, while on the contrary quite a few firms have brought Chinese workers to Japan.

Our company has been manufacturing casual clothing focused on children’s wear in Kojima for 35 years.

Many children’s garments being sold in the country, too, are made in China, but we pit ourselves against them in using what is called a *naishoku* (sideline work) manufacturing system in which homemakers are recruited to do piecework at home to turn out high-quality children’s wear capable of competing with inexpensive clothes produced in China. And our products have pleased our customers.

Naishoku Work Done at Home

There are many homemakers in this town who had sewing experience in factories when they were younger. Also, there are many women who quit working temporarily due to childbirth or other reasons but wish to get a job again because childcare has settled down. And some young women who have become members of society hunt for sewing jobs. However, work positions for them are considerably scarce com-

pared with bygone days.

Not a few sewing factories have relocated their production facilities abroad in an attempt to cut back on personnel costs and beat the influx of low-priced foreign clothing. On the other hand, some factories accept Chinese workers as trainees paid less than regular employees.

We manufacture goods by depending on the conventional method of *naishoku* that enables the employment of women in Kojima who like to make clothing but have no place to work. Quite a few of them strongly feel they do not want to lose out to Chinese products and people. At present, we have 28 women *naishoku* workers aged 38 to 72.

Because they have excellent sewing skills and possess their own sewing machines at home, we do not have to maintain our factory nor do we need to teach them sewing techniques from the ground up. We can minimize the cost of production as we put a complete division of labor into practice and pay workers on a piecework basis.

The company’s president (myself) calls on *naishoku* workers at home with cut cloth and a trial product, gives them a simple oral explanation, and thus completes an order for the desired commodity. Without giving them detailed steps to finish production, these seasoned workers understand what they should do to produce what is ordered.

Housewives have an advantage, too, in working on the side at home. Unlike holding a position in a company, they can use intervals between household chores to do the sewing job at their own pace. They are free from age restrictions such as mandatory retirement. The work makes their life worth living and helps them come into contact with other people. And more than anything else, their income adds to their husbands’ earnings and pensions.

Presently, a *naishoku* network is spreading out into other prefectures as we get requests for household sewing work by homemakers from those in other provinces.

Photos: Marumitsu Apparel Co.



Elaborate & affectionate sewing by seasoned Japanese sewers working at home ensures excellent product quality.



Without any single fray or ravel, Jippon wear enables children to move in comfort while on the run or squatting down.

Fashionable Wear Made with Care

The brand name of our children's clothes, Jippon, comes from the word Japan. It symbolizes products manufactured in Japan. As Jippon products, we make children's trousers with the aim of selling them for 1,900 yen per pair. While it was considered impossible to market the trousers made in Japan at this price, we made it possible by resorting to the method of *naishoku*.

Clothes sewn by housewives at home are completed with care compared with those mass produced in China as they quest to the very end for comfortable clothes for children to wear, a fact that is particularly important for kids. Wearing T-shirts without tucking them inside the trousers has gone mainstream among youngsters in recent years, with the waist portion of trousers directly touching the skin. Normally, the elastic portion sewn on the waist part of trousers is liable to swell and, when it bloats to a large extent, it gives uncomfortable feelings to children. However, seasoned housewives demonstrate their skills in trying as much as possible to restrain the elastic portion from expanding and to keep it in an even condition.

It is due to the attention they pay to such minute points in producing high-quality trousers – not merely they are simply made in Japan – that they are well received by customers. Currently, 200 pairs of pants are being sold daily on average at eight stores handling Jippon-labeled goods.

One of the stores is located in a shopping mall near Kansai International Airport in Osaka. There are many cases where foreign tourists visit the mall to buy souvenirs prior to their departure from Japan. Recently, the number of Chinese tourists has especially been on the rise and Jippon products are also popular among them. When they wish to buy clothes for adults and children, they find "Made in China" tags are attached to most of them. They don't want to take the trouble of purchasing goods made in their own country. They appear to find value in clothing manufactured in Japan. Many Chinese tourists give high marks to Jippon products and buy them in bulk.

Product Development with Distributor

We cherish cooperation with our distributor in the development of Jippon products. We deliver our products direct to our distributor Markey's Co. without going through any agent. Accordingly, we get opinions and ideas immediately from the dealer. We receive daily from

Markey's such information as what kind of design or color is popular and manufacture merchandise in a manner timed with demand trends.

We never fail to hold careful preliminary discussions with Markey's in the development of new products. We improve our products at any time in response to customer needs on designs conforming to seasons or on methods of sewing. We take advantage of being a small company and use it as a weapon to make quick decisions and work out a new product.

Development Abroad Eyed

Although our company is presently devoted to domestic sales, we have decided to participate in the 10th Shanghai International Children-Baby-Maternity Products Expo in July in search of the possibility of carrying out development abroad. The forthcoming exposition in the Chinese city will be the biggest of its kind for children's wear. A total of 3,200 booths will be installed at the event's site measuring 69,000 square meters by some 1,000 companies from China and other countries. A total of 1,500 brands will be exhibited. Buyers from not only China but other nations are expected to visit the exposition.

We plan to put on display samples of about 50 items, introducing the charm of "Made-in-Japan" quality armed with durability and fine texture that cannot be attained in mass production. We hope people in the rest of the world will someday support wonderful commodities crafted by Japanese housewives engaging in *naishoku* homework.

Discover Japan's Lure by Use of *Naishoku*

Japanese sewing technicians are on the decline as they were forced down by low-priced foreign commodities. Yet, many of them are still in existence. We are convinced that we can manufacture products that won't give in to foreign goods not only in terms of quality but also in price if we make use of the power of sewing technicians in the style of *naishoku*. We would like to back up the Japanese textile industry to become further robust in the future. We also will increase the number of technicians and work opportunities at home. We believe that active use of the *naishoku* system will not be confined to the field of sewing alone. It will lead to the tapping of other forms of technical power currently buried in oblivion in provincial areas. **JS**

Kozo Mitsuzane is a founder/manager of Marumitsu Apparel Co.