

Interview with Amane Tatsumura, President of Koho Tatsumura Corp.

## Passing on 1,500-Year-Old Textile Weaving Art – Koho Tatsumura Presents the World of Traditional Japanese Textiles

By Japan SPOTLIGHT

Anything that is well preserved and has survived over many ages has a great fascination and value for people. In Japan, we may find such value and beauty in many classical paintings and handicrafts, and traditional woven fabric is one of them. We visited an exhibition of “Nishiki Textiles” (Japanese brocade) at the Gallery Azuma at Ginza on Feb. 17, 2021 and interviewed Amane Tatsumura, president of Koho Tatsumura Corp., creator of Nishiki Traditional Woven Fabrics.

(Interviewed on Feb. 17, 2021)

### History of Koho Tatsumura

**JS:** Could you please introduce the history of your company?

**Tatsumura:** My great grandfather Heizo Tatsumura I (pseudonym Koha, 1876-1962), became a kimono dealer in Osaka and at the age of 18 he started an independent textile manufacturing business. He then began studying fabrics for producing high-quality textiles as a manufacturer and worked on inventing innumerable new weaving techniques and restoration of ancient fabrics. My grandfather Heizo Tatsumura II (pseudonym Kosho, 1905-1978), took over his father's work and, having founded a workshop in Kyoto and being an academic scholar, worked on research on fabrics and restoration of innumerable ancient textiles. My family business's core is thus research on techniques with regard to fabrics. My father Koho Tatsumura (1946-2019) also succeeded to this core business and in 1976 founded Tatsumura Heizo Research Institute on Textile Art Inc., and it was then renamed after Koho Tatsumura Co., Ltd. in 1982. Continuing his study on restoration of ancient fabrics, he worked on creating contemporary textile art as a fabric artist by taking advantage of the techniques he learned from his research. In succeeding my father, I am also working on production of traditional textile art as well as research on ancient fabrics with hope these efforts will result in passing on traditional Japanese brocade (Nishiki Traditional Woven Fabrics) to future generations.



Amane Tatsumura

### Appeal of Nishiki Traditional Woven Fabrics

**JS:** Could you tell us about the appeal of Nishiki Textiles?

**Tatsumura:** We call beautiful colored leaves in autumn in Japan “autumn with beautiful leaves” (*kinshu*). Japanese have been using the word *nishiki* (brocade) to refer to stunning beauty. So *nishikiori* (Japanese brocade) is a figured fabric woven into magnificent patterns from a variety of colored threads including gold and silver. A Chinese character corresponding to *nishiki* consists of “gold” and “silk woven fabric”. Thus it literally means a silk woven fabric worth gold. We use this word to express our commitment to producing such beautiful and gorgeous woven fabrics.

**JS:** Around what age were the textiles you have been working on restoring produced?

**Tatsumura:** They are largely ones made in ancient times in Japan. In my father's case, he worked on ones from the Nara Period (710-794) and Heian Period (794-1185), as well as the Muromachi Period (1336-1573) categorized as the Medieval Age. My grandfather restored the one that the Otani Expedition (organized and sent by Kozui Otani, head priest of one of the Japanese Buddhist sects, Jodoshinshu, at the beginning of the 20th century for academic research on the Silk Road in Central Asia) brought to Japan from

Torfan, a city in the Northwest of China in the Uyghur Autonomous Region. Its title is “Figured Fabric on Flower Trees with Deer” made at the beginning of the 600s. According to his study on a comparison with “Four Season Lions”, the first dyed and woven stuff textile designated as a National Treasure in Japan that was discovered in the Hall of Dreams (Yumedono) at Horyuji Temple and that once belonged to Prince Shotoku, one of the ancient great Japanese rulers, this could have been produced in the time of the Sui Dynasty of China at the beginning of the 600s.

**JS: Among the restored ones, are there many designated as National Treasures?**

**Tatsumura:** Yes. Restoration of ancient fabrics without reference documents would be extremely laborious. So we have been working mostly on brand brocades designated as National Treasures of which the history is well-known, or ones clearly presented in old documents. Many of what we have been working on are ones called “special fabrics” representing cloths with certain woven patterns produced in the Kamakura and Muromachi Periods (1185-1573).

**JS: Talking about the Heian Period, we can imagine a gorgeous and magnificent nobleman’s life. But the Nara Period suggests a more sober and simple life.**

**Tatsumura:** No, the brocade in the Nara Period is also magnificent. In a museum, you would see its color fading, but what people actually saw in the Nara Period was more splendid. After its restoration, you would find it more colorful. With the reemergence of the color dyed with a plant, it has become very beautiful and you could then appreciate the people’s aesthetics in the Nara Period. Its weaving technique was accomplished with as much skill as in our own age.

**JS: Japanese brocade was a clothing of ancient imperial family members and noblemen, those in the privileged class.**

**Tatsumura:** Yes. I guess it was a beautiful fabric made as a symbol of power.

**JS: Would there be any Chinese influence in its rich colors?**

**Tatsumura:** You can see signs of cultural influence from another country on those in more ancient times. As time goes by, you gradually find more fabrics born from Japan’s own aesthetic sense. For example, “Figured Fabric with Flowers, Birds and Animals on Green Cloth” – a fabric produced in the Nara Period (*Photo 1*) – looks somewhat similar to a Chinese fabric in terms of its packed design. On the other hand, looking at “Figured Fabric with Peony and Arabesque Pattern on Red Cloth” from the Muromachi Period (*Photo 2*), there is a space between the peony and leaves. This must come from the Japanese aesthetic sense.

**JS: Do Japanese brocades differ from one age to the next?**

**Tatsumura:** Yes. As time proceeded from the Nara Period to the Muromachi Period, there had been a variety of weaving techniques, but in spite of the technical differences, you can see they produce fabrics with the best techniques in each period. I have heard people having seen those ancient fabrics express astonishment that even in the Nara Period they produced such exquisite fabrics. In my view, fabrics produced in the Nara Period would be similar to those produced in our own day. Technical progress can be achieved in terms of production efficiency but I think the artisans’ skill in the



Original



Restored

Photo 1: Japan Traditional Textile Foundation

*“Shosoin Warehouse Rift Figured Fabric with Flowers, Birds and Animals on Green Cloth” (Nara Period, Kyoto National Museum)*



Original



Restored

Photo 2: Japan Traditional Textile Foundation

*"Mirror Bag with Figured Fabric with Peony and Arabesque Pattern on Red Cloth" (National Treasure, Muromachi Period, Kyoto National Museum)*

Nara and Heian Periods would be even higher than our current technical skills and also their aesthetic intuition would be overwhelming.

**JS: Even in the Nara Period, a wide range of jobs related to textile production were established as professional skills.**

**Tatsumura:** Yes, I think so. Otherwise they could not have produced and passed on such fabrics even to our own age. In this regard as well, a fabric production site as well as the quality of an artisan's job would not be so much different from today.

**JS: In our age, is fabric design done more by artisans who have succeeded to their family business or by experts having majored in art?**

**Tatsumura:** Either case is possible. It would be up to a weaver's production style. In some cases, I think weavers ask a designer to come up with a pattern. In our company, my grandfather and father designed fabric patterns on their own.

**JS: In your own produced fabrics, how many colors of threads do you use at maximum?**

**Tatsumura:** In this exhibition, we have a work using 50-60 colors. The more colors we use, the more complex weaving we have to do. Among my father's works, the maximum of the colors was 1,200. Dyeing the threads with such a variety of colors is extremely laborious, but my father and grandfather made colors just like a painter did on a palette and so many of their works have more than 100 colors.

## Role of Japan Traditional Textile Foundation

**JS: Koho Tatsumura, while working on restoration of ancient fabrics and production of new ones, founded the Japan Traditional Textile Foundation in 2011. For what purpose was this foundation created? What role or mission does the foundation have?**

**Tatsumura:** The primary goal of the foundation is to pass on traditional techniques for producing Japanese brocade to future generations. In particular, we consider the comprehensive restoration of ancient fabrics the most important mission. As Japanese clothing has changed from kimono to Western-style wear since a long time ago, the traditional hand-made textile industry has been declining.

Against this background, Japanese people find less and less chances of contact with traditional fabrics. In our foundation, we organize gatherings for listening to presentations by some artisans working on restoration of ancient fabrics or production of traditional fabrics invited as our guests. Having thought about creating an opportunity for people in general to have contact with traditional textiles, my father, in starting the foundation, began a hands-on weaving experience and workshop tour for the visitors. As such, we consider it important for visitors to observe a real manufacturing site and continue to hope that they will learn about the fabric-making process from their own experience.

**JS: Japanese brocade is very beautiful and reflects Japanese aesthetics. We believe that passing this on to future generations would mean passing on Japanese identity, as in the case of other traditional arts. People overseas might be very interested in this ancient Japanese culture.**



**Tatsumura:** Yes, I think so. We have been encouraging promotion overseas. We were planning to organize an exhibition in Rome in March 2020, but unfortunately we had to postpone it due to the worldwide spread of Covid-19. In order to promote Japanese culture overseas, we are thinking about not only holding exhibitions but also organizing lectures. Textiles are common all over the world and thus we can share our traditional textile culture with the rest of the world. We must promote communication overseas more actively.

**JS: What are your specific activities in research and restoration of ancient fabrics?**

**Tatsumura:** We call our restoration a comprehensive restoration operation. We pursue not only restoration but also discovering the exact techniques used for ancient textiles in the restoration process and recording them. The fabric making process is divided into more than 70 sections for division of labor, such as raising silkworms, spinning threads, dyeing them and weaving them. Furthermore, from preparatory work such as crafting tools for weaving, making looming devices or speculating on designs for weaving, there are specialists for each working process and only with their full collaboration can our fabrics be born. Therefore, after having looked into the details of each process and learned about its relations with the historical background and culture of ancient times, restoring fabrics would lead to acknowledgement of jobs that had been unknown so far, and this leads to new job creation for artisans. Also, artisans with highly specialized techniques are decreasing today, and it will be important for us to learn about them now and inherit these techniques. Presently we can record operations by video and with this help, we would like to preserve as many old techniques as possible comprehensively and carry them on into the future. We would also like to take advantage of such knowledge, skills and techniques for our contemporary works.

**JS: Do you restore not only the ancient fabrics but also the related techniques and tools?**

**Tatsumura:** Yes, we do. The traditional Japanese treadle-operated tall loom in *Photo 3* is one from the Nara Period restored by us. As for a loom itself, there is no record preserved, and we are restoring it after research on its shape and detecting it by guessing what device would be needed for a fabric as such. We call this restoration by guessing. This tall loom uses different wood materials fitting part by part. For example, the axis on which warp threads are hanging is made of pine hard enough to resist the tension of the threads, while for the seat of the weaver a softer wood like Japanese cypress is used. It is assembled without nails, so the crafter of this loom would need knowledge and techniques on handling the wooden materials like a carpenter specializing in temples and shrines.

This loom-supporting technology is also the origin of another kind

of Japanese manufacturing with a global reputation, because Toyota Motor Inc. developed from the automobile section of Toyota Industries Corporation, which was founded as a maker of automatic looms, and became independent. So we could say that inventions and technologies born in the process of the modernization of looms were the origin of Toyota Motor today. In *Photo 3* you can see equipment on the upper part of the loom named “Jacquard” and on the left-hand side slender cardboard. The

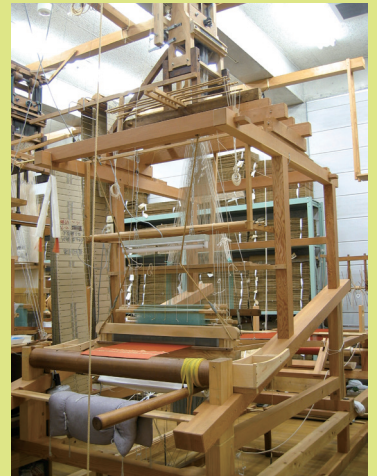
“Jacquard card” linking those two was Japanese technology from the Meiji Period (1868-1912) using a mechanical loom taking advantage of a punch card invented by French inventor Joseph Marie Jacquard (1752-1834). This technology was a big invention that led to the development of computers. IBM in the United States achieved a big success by developing data-processing machines by using punch cards. In Japan, Murata Machinery Corporation, founded as Nishijin Jacquard Machinery Manufacturing Corporation, is still today working on the global business front as a maker of industrial machinery.

In addition, there is a tool called a shuttle moving left and right in passing the weft between the warp. It is said that the idea for the first automatic ticket gate developed by OMRON Corporation came from this shuttle’s movement, in particular the part of the machine that lets a ticket in and out. Thus, looms could be sources of all kinds of machines.

**JS: It is interesting to find that loom could be regarded as the origin of computers or other modern machines. But assuming that the hand-woven textile production process is divided into many parts and special craftsmen with specific skills for each part are in charge of each process, there will be a shortage of people with these skills in the future. How will it be possible to attract new people to traditional fabrics?**

**Tatsumura:** For that purpose as well, we organize hands-on weaving experiences or workshop tours. In particular, we hope that teenagers have such opportunities and we organize tours for them to visit our workshop to write a short essay on their experience during their summer break. These participating kids look very happy and we find this highly rewarding. And regardless of age, there are many people coming to visit our workshop with great interest. So we will continue

Photo 3: Japan Traditional Textile Foundation



Restored traditional Japanese treadle-operated tall loom

to do our best to attract as many people as possible to our workshop.

**JS: In universities are there any programs on Japanese brocade?**

**Tatsumura:** I am teaching a class on textile culture centered on field work at Doshisha University. I also sometimes give other lectures at the university. We also accept university students learning about textiles for tours and for experience in our Japanese traditional weaving workshop.

## Japanese Brocade in Contemporary Times

**JS: Japanese wear kimono less and less often. In thinking about the future of Japanese brocade, where else would we find a need for it besides kimono and artistic works?**

**Tatsumura:** There will be a need for practical goods like ties or wallets or souvenirs from art museums. There are also needs in other traditions like Japanese tea ceremony instruments or clothing for traditional Japanese dances, and so I believe there would be a wide range of usages for these fabrics. I believe it will be important for us to showcase traditional textile arts to the rest of the world. And I would like in particular to let them know that textiles in Japan have been used for a variety of purposes since a long time ago.

## Interaction with the Rest of the World

**JS: You were about to open an exhibition in Rome in 2020. Could you tell us about your interactions with other countries?**

**Tatsumura:** We had an exhibition (a travelling one) from 2000 until 2004 at the Lahti Art Museum in Finland, at the Japan Art Center of the Krakow National Museum in Poland, at the Budapest National Applied Art Museum in Hungary, at the House of Culture of Japan in Rome and at the House of Culture of Japan in Paris. My father also gave a lecture as a guest speaker at an international conference hosted by the European Association for Japanese Studies (EASJ) respectively at Helsinki University and Warsaw University.

Another exhibition was planned in March 2020 at the House of Culture of Japan in Rome where both my grandfather and father had exhibited in the past. I believed that Rome and our family were closely connected with each other, but the pandemic prevented it this time. I myself had an opportunity to lecture as part of the Japanese Foreign Ministry's program in Delhi and Varanashi in India, at the Japan Society in London, at Princeton University and at Berkeley Music University in the US, as well as at the National Palace Museum

in Taiwan. In addition, we are now doing joint research on ancient fabrics between Perugia University in Italy and the Museum of Osaka University.

**JS: Asia and Europe were linked to each other by the Silk Road. In this light, can we assume that the origins of Japanese textiles can be discovered in this Silk Road culture zone?**

**Tatsumura:** My grandfather did research on it and I would like to visit the countries along the Silk Road to study this. But it is difficult to do so before the Covid-19 pandemic is over.

**JS: You said that you would strengthen your efforts to promote traditional Japanese textile art to the rest of the world. What kind of response have you received so far?**

**Tatsumura:** Before the pandemic, we had visitors from overseas in our workshop and I believe there is a strong interest in our textile art overseas. I had contact from an Australian textile art club planning to visit Kyoto primarily to see our workshop, having seen us on Instagram.

Several years ago when I visited a textile art workshop in Perugia in Italy, I was told by its owner, the fourth successor like myself, that she had been watching our Instagram site all those years. We are truly connected with each other today by the Internet! Therefore, we would like to actively continue our promotion by using SNS hereafter as well.

## Traditional Culture & Earning Capacity

**JS: To keep the Japanese economy in good health, we need to restore our earning capacity. In this regard, it has been pointed out that we must turn the value of tourism or Japanese traditional culture into a business. What do you think about this?**

**Tatsumura:** Yes, I think so too. Without a strong economy, we would not be able to maintain jobs for the highly skilled artisans. How we can achieve manufacturing during the Covid-19 pandemic will decide our post-pandemic world. We must realize our manufacturing for protecting those highly skilled artisans who can pass on their skills to future generations.

**JS**

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