

# Culture 2

## Concept Store Touhenboku: a New Model of Business

By Mukesh Williams

Touhenboku is located on Nakamachi Street, close to Matsumoto Station in Nagano. It has been run by Jin and Reiko Kobayashi for 38 years. As customers walk through the main street, past an artistic Japanese sliding door, Reiko greets them, and they enter an exquisite shop laid out with exquisite artifacts made from wood, clay, and iron. Jin is an unassuming man in his late sixties working at the back of the store silently. His life carries the experience of many decades. Here tradition and functionality come together. The name Touhenboku represents a fragment of pottery and nature. Embedded in this name is his aspiration to maintain an aesthetic sensibility that allows him to unhesitatingly pick up and cherish even things discarded by the roadside, like mere stones, so long as he finds them beautiful. Visitors to Touhenboku experience the quiet flow of time looking at the goods in the store. Jin explains that today Matsumoto has acquired a tasteful uniqueness, but a few decades ago it was not an easy place to work. Matsumoto is a regional city whose population was only about 200,000, unlike Tokyo. In winter snow accumulated on the roads. The cars that passed by had spikes around their tires that raised a cloud of dust, preventing pedestrians from walking on sidewalks. Some 70-80% of the newly started retail shops in Matsumoto could not succeed and left. The early days of Touhenboku were not easy either.

Touhenboku immerses the customer in a shopping experience

around overarching themes of history, lifestyle design, art, and aesthetics. This approach allows the customer to experience the passage of time through an ordinary artifact like a wooden butter knife that floats on the table or an electric floor stand that creates a translucent washi space. Touhenboku attracts customers not only from Japan but also from Europe, America, and South Asia, who can enter the past by walking along the streets. Touhenboku is an innovative retail shop that redesigns traditional Japanese crafts with modern functionality. The history of Touhenboku traces the history of contemporary Matsumoto.

### The Uniqueness of Matsumoto

Matsumoto carries the essence of all eras from Edo to the present. Therefore, the sensibilities from all these times are also alive and live together. Being an island country, Japan possesses different climates and distinctive cultures in each region. Everywhere in Matsumoto there are buildings that are over 100 years old. Side by side there are state-of-the-art modern buildings. And even now this country has thousands of years of history, and ancient customs are still alive everywhere. There are small nameless temples and shrines in the town, and there is an Ojizo-san enshrined at the crossroads. There is a deep involvement of the people and the government with



Shop



Touhenboku Entrance

the aesthetics of Matsumoto. In the city, Japanese wood, paper, clay, and stone artifacts carry cross-cultural influences that continue to fire the imagination of modern designers. The town is called Gaku-to. "Gaku" means a mountainous location and refers to learning and music. Matsumoto possesses high aesthetics and deep sensibility; both make the quality of its stores excellent.

## Establishing Touhenboku & Creating a Concierge Image

In the late 1980s, Jin started the retail shop in Matsumoto, where he was born. From an early age Jin was encouraged by his siblings to appreciate art. His brother was a sculptor, and his sister was a musician. Jin also loved music, but while studying in Tokyo, Jin decided that he would open a unique shop, which will be called Touhenboku (陶片木). It was once a dilapidated house without windows, dividers, or a kitchen. "It wasn't a place for a human being to live in. It was so dirty that we had to wear shoes to enter the premises." The Kobayashi couple gradually refurbished the store/residence, gained help from relatives, and earned 50,000 to 100,000 yen a month with part-time work only to find that this amount was not enough to manage the store. Since there was not enough money, he requested artists to send instruments, records, and books, and once they were sold, he would pay them. Gradually he was able to establish his unique store.

Without any proper training, Jin depended on his love for kiln pottery and creativity. He has made unique items, such as a floating butter knife and a four-tiered artifact-keeping lamp. He himself is a fascinating man, embodying in him the changes of many decades. His work stands out as a unique business model suitable for global customers. His customers come from near and far. His shop symbolizes the way Japanese business can be renewed. The future is uncertain. Sometimes it impinges upon the present. Touhenboku is undoubtedly a concept store that will survive the changing times.

Jin has interesting ideas about people, seasons, and places. He explains that "No two people are alike, and no two summers are. People and seasons are interactive and olfactory. There are no star-crossed exchanges. If you go to a movie theater, a bar, or a restaurant, you may not develop the ability to sense things, but these places will give you some benefit. To feel the truth in the moment, you need your imagination, especially your leisure time to think about one thing at a time." He believes that Japanese wood, paper, and stone all carry cross-cultural influences of ages.

When one walks around the town of Matsumoto, it is possible to feel the presence of those who lived a long time ago: "You'll be able to think of people here and there that are still alive today. There is a charm in Matsumoto that will not allow you to get bored even if you are from overseas or visit the city many times. Please enjoy Matsumoto with all your five senses." Undoubtedly, the well-preserved streets, wooden buildings, *kura* storehouses, and Edo-era architecture of Matsumoto carry the memories of centuries and propel its business community to devise ways rooted in its tradition

to attract new clientele.

Jin devised strategies to improve upon the designs of the past. He wanted his shop to be as close as possible to the site of production. Rather than operating as a wholesaler or ordinary retailer, he began to stock items chosen based on his own aesthetic sensibility and concept. Today it can be called a "select shop". At that time, this type of business stood out as unusual, given that most wholesalers and retailers specialized exclusively in selling one type of item. The shop featured books, musical instruments, and pottery. In one sense this model emerged out of necessity, since he lacked the capital to buy large quantities and could only acquire excellent pieces from respected artisans little by little. But precisely because of that, Touhenboku became a concept shop that went beyond categories of merchandise, showcasing both distinctly Japanese aesthetics and its own unique vision. Pottery absorbs water and changes little by little. Therefore, before serving food, we ensure that the bowl is wet. The wet bowl will gradually undergo a change, which in Japanese is called *sodateru*, or the procedure of nurturing. Jin believes that earthenware and stoneware carry the distinctive fragrance and conversations of centuries. A craftsman's tools and the material he uses develop an identity as they grow old and must be celebrated. However, to execute his aesthetics and creativity into artifacts that would sell to make a profit was not easy in 1987.

Jin's customers would come to his shop, look at objects on display, but would leave without buying anything. Jin confesses that "in the initial four years it was hard to survive. We sustained our lives, my wife and I, licking salt as the Japanese would say." However, about three or four years later, things began to change. A magazine company contacts him for an interview. That convinced him that "someone out there was paying attention. Gradually, people from outside Matsumoto started to visit Touhenboku, on their way to and from places like Karuizawa, Hakuba, or Kamikouchi from Tokyo. I don't think this had to do with my ability but rather the attraction of the town itself. Matsumoto has real potential and the power that makes people come back. Some people return dozens of times. Those same people started visiting Touhenboku repeatedly."

Touhenboku is a story of endurance and invention that has made it into a concept shop. It took 38 years to achieve success. The shop itself carries an ambience of a bygone era that pulls the customers through its sliding doors. The shop is divided into three parts. The front presents the newest artifacts displayed on tables and walls. A panel separates the last section of the shop. Here both a piano and a proprietor's work desk are kept. Behind it is a store and packaging room for goods. A narrow passage leads to a staircase and to the second floor. There are wooden artifacts, like antique chairs, tables, trellises, separators, green teapots, butter knives, cutting boards, pottery, cooking utensils, and many other things. Different craftsmen have made them. The owner encourages customers who have time to go up and enjoy the aesthetics. He tells the customers that the bowls, plates, or spoons they have chosen to buy will "enrich their daily lives". Touhenboku redesigns Japanese artifacts, especially cooking utensils, and sells them.

The concept and design of goods come from asking inconvenient questions such as "Why do these tools get this shape? Is there anything that I can do to improve its design?" Ordinary cooking utensils such as a cutting board (*manaita*), a rice-scooping spoon (*shamoji*), or an earthenware mortar (*ataribachi*) come under his scanner. "I aim at forms that are beautiful yet offer usability beyond what we might expect. To create a new artifact anchored in the past, it is necessary to remove prejudice and look at things neutrally. I fix my gaze at wood, a teapot, and a cutting board fully and find a way to create something out of it. My way of looking at artifacts is 100% functional."

The creation of new goods is a collaborative process with the artisans. "When it comes to materials used, I often leave the choice to the craftsman. They know the market better. They understand things like which material is too expensive. So, craftsmen suggest I use a particular wood like *tsubaki*, rosewood, or walnut. I wouldn't say things like 'I like walnut specifically, but I might say I like wood that feels characteristically woody or something that doesn't stand out too much. When asking for a washi paper maker, I will say things like, 'Please scatter small flowers that bloom at the very start of spring about this much,' or 'Since we will be using it for a lampshade, please make the paper a bit thinner.'" Jin explains, "I want to reduce the inconvenience of keeping things in a place and make it aesthetically appealing. I then find a craftsman, such as a potter or a carpenter, to execute the concept. Once the material and cost are decided, the artifact is manufactured. Sometimes the result is excellent on the first try; at others it takes two to three times. A craftsman here works well on a general idea with not too many restrictions. When there is a common understanding between me and the artist, especially of language, aesthetics, and vocabulary, the result is good." Amongst the products that Jin has designed so far, there are "homage products" that show deep respect to both craftsmanship and tools used over centuries, for example, the crafting of an ironing board and a side table. Touhenboku possesses the skill to redesign the past and pull it into the present.

## Grown into a Domestic & International Store

Customers come from near and far. "I am not particularly interested in creating a community of customers providing for events or millinery charm but in functioning as a concierge of my store to guide people about forthcoming events in Matsumoto and its attractiveness."

Tohenboku is not just a concept, but an evolution of an idea based on experience, common sense, and the passage of time. Jin explains that an "extraordinary beauty exists in every moment of our ordinary days. You don't encounter things by accident. There's always a reason. With the new goods you find here, I present you with one more gift of life. It is time, which is both invisible and an opportunity. A brand-new time can be created by watching them, using them, or wearing them. An unknown feeling will start to flow in you." He advises his customers that if they find any wood or ceramic artifact beautiful, "they should hold it gently in their hands and see the truth lying inside."

His wife, Reiko, explains that it "is also important to have the attitude of -1. This means that if it is not -1, then it is complete. If the thing is complete, there is no gentleness that can emerge. So *omotenashi* also permeates our everyday scenery. Please see it and enjoy it." Her support and behind-the-scenes work are unmistakable. Japanese aesthetics works through incompleteness and requires building a discerning perception. Tea ceremony masters see seepage of water as part of beauty. This is different from Western aesthetics, where we rise and connect people to heaven. Thinking about the incompleteness of beauty requires a higher level of brain function. An incompleteness of beauty requires something more. Japanese aesthetics is something incomplete.

Jin explains that it is "important to look around us 360 degrees and look at the tools and goods around us. We should also discuss great ideals such as nation building and also something close to ourselves. This way we can polish our sensibility on a daily basis. I devise a way for customers to become highly sensitive to the artifacts in my store, for example, the green façade outside, the beauty of windows, fragrance, sound, display of goods, our behavior, words to use, or way to speak to customers." Through



Tohenboku display 1



Tohenboku display 2



Toast rack

Photo: author



Mr. Kobayashi and author



Mr. Jin and Ms. Reiko Kobayashi

days of such reflection, Touhenboku has gradually evolved from a shop for collecting things to a store that possesses beauty. A perceptive customer may intuitively understand the thematic unity of the artifacts displayed in the store.

Although Touhenboku deals with new items, it accepts repairs for everything – from pottery and lacquerware to lampshades. “When people in Tokyo hear that, they are surprised. If pottery breaks, they just throw it away. Many have never used lacquerware, so they don’t even know you can have it recoated. Even chopsticks we receive from all over the country to repair, like when the tip is broken by just 5 millimeters. I always thought it was natural to keep using things carefully for a long time.”

“I believe it is important to spend time on oneself,” Jin says, “to grow, and to be able to feel, understand, and learn. I must be able to grow myself to have a certain pattern to learn, feel, and understand. This is the key. Unknown words provide us with much stimulus, but in order to feel the truth and beauty around us every day, every moment, we need imagination. Time implies the time to think, to think through goods. There are many ways to meet people. For example, at night alone having tea and thinking about someone. At such a moment of thought you are meeting a friend. Meeting with people is also a function of time, especially meeting them directly.”

Jin explains poetically that Touhenboku exists between the earth and the moon. “When you change your perspective, you can release the self and experience a feeling of floating, like a comfortable and pleasant vertigo. I have a feeling of tribute to the tools that have been used for a long time, like a British-style ironing board. This iron board I have recreated as a sideboard, which took twenty years in the designing and making. I like to keep goods as they are without predisposition. I see through goods and design things that are needed for our life and are 100% functional. I’m satisfied because I believe our lives change and the goods must adjust to our present life. There are several products I’ve designed, such as a wood turner, sesame grinding set, *shamoji* for scooping rice, cutting board, Kyushu teapot, butter knife, and lid to boil.” Jin believes that existence happens in the now. “Today, this very moment, think about

it. We can imagine about tomorrow and act upon it. We cannot return to yesterday. Tomorrow may come from now or may not come. This very moment everything exists for me. The person who wakes up now, the person who is in front of the dining table, a person who is looking at the sunset, and a person who is running away in the midst of war. Life is difficult to leave behind. This is from a movie called *Meet Joe Black*.” There is a sadness in things passing, but the moment has to be grasped.

## Successor & Social Mission

Jin concludes with a smile that “It is worrisome that we do not have a child who can succeed in my business. If I can find someone who understands, loves, and inherits Touhenboku, it will be my great pleasure.” But he has no regrets as to what is happening now. “How can we regret an uncreated future?”

He believes that Touhenboku has a social purpose of redesigning the past and benefiting the present. He is excited that he had been asked to design a plate and a cup for the Seiji Ozawa Matsumoto Festival in the summer of 2025. In 1987 Seiji Ozawa conducted Gustav Mahler’s Symphony No. 2 (“The Resurrection”) with the Boston Symphony Orchestra. It was the same year Touhenboku was established. On the occasion of the 2025 performance of the same symphony, Jin spoke of his wish to engrave the hand-written German words from the “Resurrection” symphony into his design.

*Aufersteh'n, ja aufersteh'n wirst du, mein Staub, nach kurzer Ruh* – “Rise again, yes, you rise again, my dust, after brief rest!” Just as those words suggest, artifacts too can transcend time and breathe life anew.

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