Culture

Concept Shop Touhenboku: Transcending Wholesalers



Author Mukesh Williams

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As a master craftsman, Jin Kobayashi redesigns past artifacts into new functional products. Therefore, Touhenboku is a concept store providing a new business model par excellence in Matsumoto. The model can be adapted by other stores with some changes, keeping in mind the aesthetics and demand of the city.

Reviews by readers have prompted *Japan SPOTLIGHT* to do another writeup on Touhenboku. This article is a follow up of "Concept Store Touhenboku" (*Japan SPOTLIGHT*, January/February 2026) that highlighted this distinctive retail enterprise in Matsumoto. This interview with Jin and Reiko Kobayashi, the proprietors of Touhenboku, builds on the store's values of tradition, functionality and aesthetics rooted in Matsumoto's long history. It explores the evolution, inspiration, and vision of Touhenboku. Touhenboku is visualized as a concept or select shop that recreates traditional Japanese crafts for contemporary day-to-day life use. The previous article used Touhenboku's evolving story to touch on Japanese aesthetics, the continuity of culture from the Edo Era to the present, and the ways a small business can sustain decades of perseverance before achieving lasting success.

In the article it was pointed out that Touhenboku is not just a conventional store but a concept store that brings together books, musical instruments, pottery, everyday objects, and traditional crafts into a handpicked environment where the proprietor's aesthetic sensibility decides what goes on display. Touhenboku does not believe in selling single items or functioning as a wholesaler of specific goods but works as a select shop keeping an eye on beauty, functionality and cultural depth. The shop creates a business model that redesigns basic materials like wood, paper, and stone into modern works of art that still remain beautiful and functional. It does not pursue novelty for the sake of novelty but to design products that support daily life while preserving craftsmanship. Kobayashi calls it a Japanese approach to crafting artifacts where design is not separate from culture but an expression of it. As such the artistic sensibility of the proprietor becomes the core value of the store. Items in the shop are chosen not by mass market appeal but how well they represent the shop's idea of incompleteness, subtlety, and gracious hospitality *(omotenashi)*.

Matsumoto, the shop's location, is central to the story. Matsumoto is a city where Edo essence survives alongside modern architecture. Ancient structures sit cheek by jowl with modern buildings and traditional practices coexist with contemporary ways. It is possible to see a cultural continuity consciously woven into Touhenboku's image. The shop does not just occupy a space on the Nakamachi Street but is culturally embedded in the spirit of Matsumoto. In the earlier article

Photo: Author



Touhenboku concept shop

Photo: Author



Mr. Jin and Ms. Reiko Kobayashi

Photo: Author



Table with partition screen

Photo: Author



Chair overlooking street

it was suggested that it is the quality of Matsumoto that gave rise to a business like Touhenboku where a thoughtful creativity can grow and be monetized.

It has taken 38 years for Touhenboku to achieve success based on endurance, resilience, and adaptation in a world of changing fashion. Touhenboku is an example of a long-term approach to building a stable enterprise that brings economic returns. Touhenboku can be used as a model beyond retail. It is a cultural experiment that shows how Japan's rich past can be recreated to bring economic benefit.

The Philosophy

Williams: Touhenboku evokes images of pottery fragments and natural beauty connected to discarded wood and roadside stones. What personal experience of "discarded treasure" inspired you to create this concept shop 38 years ago?

Kobayashi: Well, long ago, when I first encountered a pottery shard – when I first saw a broken fragment – it did not feel like a mere useless piece to me. Rather, it felt like a window connecting the past and the present. How should I put it? A chipped vessel, guided by the lines of imagination, emerges in the mind as a complete vessel once again.

Precisely because it was incomplete, I felt it had gained the wings of creativity and become something entirely new. In this way of thinking, when walking along roads or beaches, I began to find beauty even in ordinary rolling stones. If I found a stone beautiful, I wanted to be the kind of person who could pick it up without hesitation. A stone that simply exists there, asking for nothing. There is a purity, an innocence, in this simple state of being – completely detached from the standards and judgments of society.

Williams: You started this unconventional shop transcending wholesalers about four decades ago. What challenges were before

Photo: Author



Rice bowl

you in blending books, musical instruments, pottery, and crafts?

Kobayashi: It was not something radically unconventional. What we sold was pottery – primarily pottery. However, at that time, I do not think there were any pottery shops where music was playing, shelves were filled with books, and even musical instruments were displayed, though all of those belonged to me personally. Perhaps it was the atmosphere created by that very space itself that gave Touhenboku its distinctive character.

Williams: How did necessity shape your unique vision?

Kobayashi: I'm not sure if this answers the question, but I believe that everything in this present moment – truth itself – exists only within a few meters around us (as I mentioned before). I believe countless realizations can be found within that small sphere.

Curating Experiences

Williams: Many customers from Japan, Europe, America, and South Asia experience the "quiet flow of time" when they visit the store. What prompts you to select everyday items, like a wooden butter knife or washi lamp, to immerse visitors in the flow of history, lifestyle, and art?

Kobayashi: They are ordinary objects that can be found anywhere, in any country. People who are drawn to everyday tools, and who notice things such as a butter knife, are I think people who pay close attention to the world around them and possess an artistic sensibility.

Williams: Touhenboku reimagines traditional Japanese crafts with modern functionality. Can you share a recent example of a product that surprised you by bridging Edo-era sensibilities with today's needs?

Kobayashi: One of the vessels I recently created is a lacquerware bowl called a *Kittate-wan*. In terms of form, I emphasized straighter lines in its shape, so that it could function as a bowl suitable for both Japanese and Western cuisine.

Essence & Endurance of Matsumoto

Williams: Matsumoto combines Edo architecture with cutting-edge buildings, ancient customs, and contemporary lifestyle. How has the neighborhood influenced Touhenboku's evolution?

Kobayashi: The townscape, Matsumoto Castle, the distant Northern Alps, the rivers flowing through the city, the spring water – these are all, for me, a kind of emotional stabilizer (laughs).

Williams: The *Japan SPOTLIGHT* article called Touhenboku a symbol of Japanese business renewal amid uncertain times. What adaptations have kept the store thriving through economic shifts, like post-1987 changes or recent global events?

Kobayashi: Items such as the Crescent Moon Cutting Board and the Sesame Grinding Bowl have existed for more than 30 years. The objects that customers have continued to support for five, 10, or 15 years are all everyday tools used in daily life. The increase in inbound tourism over the past year is not unique to my shop, but what feels different now is that overseas visitors casually purchase things like mortar bowls, butter knives, spoons, and our original *Evening Moon* plates. I think the way overseas visitors perceive Japan has changed considerably as well.

Global Reach & Future

Williams: As international visitors enter "the past" via Matsumoto's streets, what cultural exchanges or overseas feedback have shaped your inventory?

Kobayashi: Rather, through people purchasing items like the *Evening Moon* plates and butter knives, I have come to feel reassured that the philosophy behind my shop can also resonate with people from overseas.

Williams: Looking ahead, what new "fragments" (products, collaborations, or ideas) do you envision for Touhenboku's next phase?

Kobayashi: At the moment, although it is not exactly a tool – though perhaps in a broader sense it could be considered one – the cat carrying a sea bream, a beckoning cat, has become popular both among Japanese customers and overseas visitors. I would like to continue thinking about objects through which people can experience a sense of Japan in this way. They are not necessarily new creations, but I would like to continue carefully preserving and developing the shop's original pieces that are currently loved and supported.

We have actually been making cat-themed objects for a long time,

in ceramics and *papier-mâché*. The beckoning cat is also my original design, and about five or six years ago I began making ceramic beckoning cats carrying sea bream on their backs. Even now they are lined up across the shop window, and they are extremely popular. It feels as though they have already traveled all around the world.

You know, there are the common beckoning cats that raise either the right paw or the left paw – you see them at places like Gotokuji Temple as well. In contrast, ours carry a sea bream on their backs. Half-jokingly, I sometimes say they come with a "powerful sea-bream booster", and that they will "strongly support and bring good fortune to everyone". While saying such things, I line up seven or eight of them across the shop window, and the effect is quite remarkable. Matsumoto is currently experiencing a huge influx of international visitors, and people constantly stop outside to take photos. At the very least, I imagine photographs of them have already spread across the world. Love for cats really is universal. Beckoning cats, after all, are uniquely Japanese, and besides practical tools, we also create folk-art style objects like these. Through such folk crafts, I hope people can experience Japan in another sense as well, and I would like to continue doing so in the future.

Photo: Author



Paper lantern

Photo: Author



Corridor with lamp

Photo: Author



Top floor display

Williams: How can you convert everyday items into something extraordinary?

Kobayashi: As I may have mentioned before, the first things we should reconsider are ordinary daily-use items, everyday objects. Objects that are completely ordinary and taken for granted. I think we should begin by looking carefully, little by little, at the things people truly use in their everyday lives. First of all, with respect – because some of these objects have continued to exist for hundreds of years. And while respecting such traditions, I ask myself whether there might still be ways to improve them or forms better suited to contemporary life. And after considering their function, I hope they can embody a kind of functional beauty as much as possible.

Williams: The items we currently carry are ceramics and kitchenware. Do you have anything else?

Kobayashi: Of course – we also carry glassware, textiles, and wooden products. So it is not only pottery; broadly speaking, most of the things we carry are related to food and dining.

Perception of Japanese & Foreign Customers About Touhenboku Goods

Japanese customers see the aesthetics of the display and moderate pricing, while foreign customers see flexibility to requests and unique Japanese products on display. From a Japanese perspective, the products displayed in Touhenboku are well-thought, unique, and reasonably priced. A unique quality implies that the products are attached to utilities such as kitchenware and tableware. The selected items have both aesthetics and utility combined, much appreciated by Japanese customers. The goods being reasonably priced means the store doesn't forget about consideration for the customers. In many shops in Tokyo, we see hiked-up prices. Touhenboku's way of dealing with customers is distinctive. They have not forgotten that people are living beings spending money for a specific purpose. There are some sellers who will sell once and make maximum profit. But in Touhenboku this is not the case. This value is seen by Japanese customers in every aspect of their business. In other words, they see an interconnectedness of business and buyers. Touhenboku treats the customers and business as an organic entity. It asks questions such as: What kind of kitchenware will light up their lives? What kind of goods will add value to familiar things? What things in their uniqueness attract customers?

Foreigners, on the other hand, see Touhenboku as a store from where they want to buy something uniquely Japanese but cannot find in other places; for example, they want to buy a beckoning cat, or *maneki neko*. Foreign tourists find it difficult to deal with products in Japan that are standardized, that is, where no change is allowed.

Photo: Author



Mr. Kobayashi and author

When a German or Swiss tourist comes and wants to ship a couple of lampshades with washi paper to their country, Touhenboku accommodates this request. Though this is extra work for the shop, they are flexible to accommodate new requests. Foreigners also see the way goods are displayed using wood and ceramics. This arrangement provides a clean appearance to the shop, complementing the overall clean ambience of Matsumoto town. It is a statement Touhenboku makes about how wood is arranged, and the way light plays on it.

Foreign tourists prefer uniquely Japanese goods because they see them as souvenirs that are both practical and culturally distinct. Japanese products are often valued for high quality, careful design, and items that reflect everyday Japanese life or traditions, such as floating butter knives, toast stands, wooden spoons, wooden partitions, or writing tables. The floating butter knife is designed with two balanced blades, so the blade never touches the table, reflecting both hygiene and minimalist elegance. The toast stand elevates slices to preserve crispness by allowing air circulation, a response to texture and convenience. The hand-carved wooden spoons are made asymmetrical to reveal the maker's touch and enhance hand grip. The wooden partition balances openness and privacy, creating a Japanese spatial design. And a traditional Japanese writing table (low writing desk) encourages a working rhythm aligned with the *tatami* lifestyle. Foreign tourists want items that are aesthetically appealing and well-crafted that they cannot easily buy at home. A characteristic Japanese design is so unique that it increases appeal. Foreign customers associate Japanese goods with quality and durability. A limited edition, and that to a region-specific item, is more special and collectible. At a concept shop, foreign tourists see goods that are locally made but extraordinary, such as a memorable design and a curated experience that cannot be duplicated. Goods that are special, limited, and connected to a specific area are sold at Touhenboku. The visit by a foreign customer feels like a discovery rather than just an ordinary purchase.

Japanese to English translation assistance by Dr. Ui Teramoto.

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