

The Prospects for Traditional Japanese Crafts

– Proposing the “Glocalization” Strategy –

By *Urushihara Takuya*

TRADITIONAL crafts are shaped by the history and climate of each locality. They passed down from generation to generation through the handicraft techniques of skilled craftspeople. But amid the rapid economic growth of the post-World War II era, new technologies were introduced and the full-fledged mass production of daily wares made of new, synthetic materials took root. What followed was a gradual decline in demand for traditional handicrafts made from natural materials. The annual production value of traditional crafts, which were designated by the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI), maintained the ¥500 billion level in the 1980s, although a gradual decreasing trend had been seen. In the 1990s, however, the rate of decrease suddenly accelerated, and in 10 years, that figure was slashed in half, dropping to about ¥260 billion in 2000. One major factor behind this slump is the inclination towards homogenization that has affected culture and lifestyle as a result of expanded globalization. With the mass production and marketing of standardized industrial products at low prices, the role of traditional crafts in daily life continues to decline.

The sluggish demand for traditional crafts has thus reached a state of crisis, shaking the very foundations of the economic livelihood of traditional craftspeople. To counter this situation, measures aimed at promoting crafts have been implemented, chiefly by the METI and local governments, according to the Law for the Promotion of Traditional Craft Product Industries enacted in 1974. To date, the Ministry has identified over 200 types of traditional crafts, and the Association for the Promotion of Traditional Craft Industries, the primary body backing the craft making

business, has certified over 5,000 master craftspeople. In recent years the decreasing production value of traditional crafts has resulted in a sharp drop in the number of practicing handicraft firms as well as craftspeople. Despite the implementation of promotional measures, the atrophy afflicting the craft making business has not been effectively stemmed.

This report details the overseas cooperation projects that have been carried out between lacquerware districts and discusses strategies to bolster traditional craft making business.

The Kiso lacquerware district (Nagano Prefecture) has been engaged in a lacquerware technical cooperation with the Union of Myanmar. A request for training in lacquerware techniques from the government of Myanmar in 1994 was the catalyst for the project. Myanmar's Governor General, who oversees small and medium-sized enterprises, visited the village of Narakawamura and signed a statement of mutual agreement for the technical cooperation. The Narakawamura village office dispatched an exploratory commission to Myanmar, and beginning in 1998, three delegations of master craftspeople were sent to impart their technical skills. In addition, trainees from Myanmar were sent to receive technical instruction in lacquerware at the Kiso lacquer craft high school. In order to implement the project, the lacquerware district in Kiso utilized a support system co-sponsored by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Japan International Cooperation Agency and the Council of Local Authorities for International Relations. As part of the series of cooperative schemes, the project puts into effect strategies that involved local Japanese residents, such as female villagers' study trips to other countries and conducting elementary school classes aimed at raising global understanding. These served to raise appreciation among the Kiso residents of the lacquerware produced there.

The lacquerware district of Kawatsura (Akita Prefecture) has been involved in the development of lacquerware based on Italian designs and has also taken part in an international exhibition. In 1998, the town office received an inquiry from Japanese designers residing in Italy, who wanted to know if it would be possible to produce Italian-designed Japanese lacquerware. The master craftsman of the Kawatsura lacquerware district agreed to the project and commenced production. In February 2000, the items became the first Japanese traditional craft to be exhibited at the Macef International Home Show in Milan. The crafts were highly appraised by buyers from France, Germany and Belgium, in addition to Italian buyers. In general, large-scale lacquerware production is segmented



A Myanmar-made lacquerware (above) and a craftsman
(Photos: Fukuhara Eiko [lacquerware], Miyakawa Haru [a craftsman])



Lacquer crafts based on Italian designs

Photo: The Center of Supporting Industry in Inakawa

into complex divisions of labor, including woodcarving, preparation of surfaces, base coating, lacquer coating and decorative accenting. The crafts are seldom distributed directly from the craftspeople to the consumer, but more often routed through district wholesalers, consumer wholesalers, department stores and retail stores. For this reason, problems such as an insufficient understanding of consumer needs and inflated prices have arisen. Because the master craftspeople were central to the project from the time of its inception, it was possible for energies to be devoted to the development of new products.

However, these two projects are not entirely without problems. In the case of the Kiso project, exchanges with Myanmar have actually been suspended. With local government finances strained, financing is also difficult to secure at the village office level. Moreover, the lacquerware making businesses are unable to identify any justifiable economic merits to the program. On the contrary, there are even concerns about cheaper Myanmar-made products flooding the Japanese market as a result of the cooperation project. And as for the expansion of Kawatsura lacquerware sales overseas, stable distribution channels have yet to be established. Another issue is the development of a new domestic market using the experience gained at the exhibitions in Italy.

The support system was reinforced as an effect of revisions in the law in 2001. And new activities were spawned because the support system, which had served mainly cooperative unions until then, was broadened to include all groups. The project in Kawatsura was a stimulus project authorized by METI, but the promotional measures spearheaded by METI are not all collaborations between overseas and domestic businesses. Until now, few domestic projects, which include human resources development, demand creation and advertising, take overseas trends into consideration. Moreover, as promotional measures fail to produce adequate effects, traditional craft reproductions or inexpensive imports from China and other Asian countries are on the rise. The situation is also worsening in terms of deteriorating domestic demand due to the protracted economic recession. The current harsh reality is that even the business of traditional craft making, which can be regarded as a typical symbol of local economic activity, is subject to the effects of globalization.

Considering future promotional measures in light of this situation, the keyword may be “glocalization.” I feel it is necessary to establish and respect local cultures and values while engaging in global collaboration and systematization. There is a need to entertain the notion of integrating domestic and overseas businesses. For this purpose, the following two points should be kept in mind. The first is that in addition to national and local governments, master craftspeople and the people who use traditional crafts should be regarded as vital actors in promotional measures. The second point is that the nurturing of Japanese traditional crafts should not focus strictly on domestic conditions, but rather, should be pursued with aggressive marketing overseas. It is also necessary to understand that there are various types of traditional crafts in the world. For example, lacquerware are produced in such Asian countries and regions as China, Taiwan, South Korea, Thailand, Myanmar, Vietnam and Bhutan. I believe that it is imperative for us to take an interest in the traditional crafts of the world, and approach the idea of traditional crafts with a global vision in order to foster the development of traditional crafts on a global level.

The strategies for the lacquerware districts described above can be regarded as projects stemming from “glocalization.” Owing to the exchanges with Myanmar, the local citizenry has acquired a better understanding of the world. The experience gained in Italy has led to the development of new products. Having a point of contact with other cultures will breed ideas for new crafts. The answer shall not present itself in the domestic playing field alone. Given the advancements in globalization, it is not possible to thwart the influx of overseas products. Moreover, as Japan relies heavily on foreign sources of raw materials, the entire production process cannot be domestically self-contained. There is a need to widen the scope of vision and draw together the respective energies of the various actors. Ideas for fostering the traditional craft industry should be generated from a “glocal” point of view, and it is essential that the resulting measures also be implemented from that perspective. **JS**

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