

A Time for Reform

Breathing Life into the Traditional Crafts Industry

By *Urushihara Takuya*

THE drive to revive the traditional crafts industry in Japan started to gain momentum in the late 1960s. Amid the emerging imbalance resulting from rapid economic growth, a desire to return to traditional things began to take root among the citizenry due to self-reflection about the lifestyle of mass production and consumption. With the enactment of the Law for the Promotion of Traditional Craft Product Industries in 1974, promotion measures initiated by the nation and local governments were started. Since then, various players have taken active roles in the traditional crafts industry.

First of all, I would like to discuss the different kinds of players involved in the traditional craft market.

Generally, traditional crafts have been distributed via complex routes. First, they are collected by wholesalers in the productive regions. Wholesalers outside the productive regions, district wholesalers and brokers are also involved in some crafts. By the time the product reaches consumers, the discrepancy between the craftsperson's price and the retail price has become unnecessarily large. There is often a complex division of labor in the manufacturing stage too, and the link between craftspeople and consumers has been weakened. In addition to such problems being directly related to the structural organization of the industry, the complexity of the general environment, which is characterized by changing lifestyles and the influx of foreign products, has contributed to the industry's atrophy.

In terms of support rendered at the central government level, the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) has created policies, mainly from the perspective of industrial promotion, and the Association for the Promotion of Traditional Craft Industries has implemented projects to increase demand and facilitate human resources development. At the local government level, municipalities in Kyoto and Ishikawa, where traditional crafts are important, are actively implementing promotional projects. Some local governments have their own systems of traditional craft authentication and certification of traditional craftspersons. The Liberal Democratic Party and the Japanese Communist Party have organized federations that promote the traditional craft industry as part of their parliamentary activities. However, despite governmental support for roughly 30 years, the situation has become worse rather than better. In fact, one could even say it has been deteriorating. What kind of approach is needed in order to make a breakthrough in this decline?

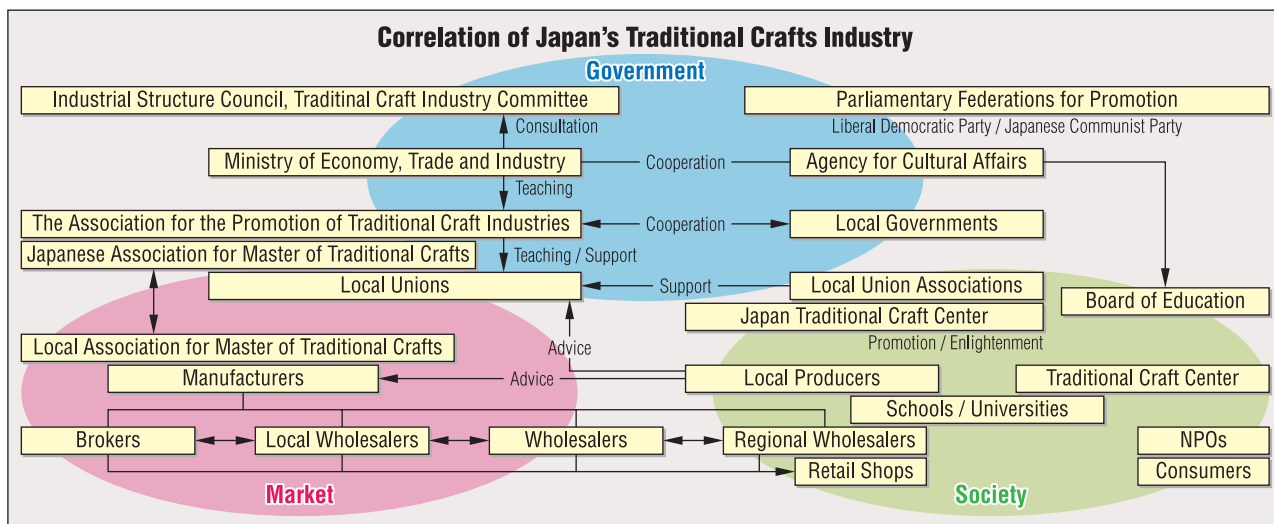
For one thing, it is expected that a proactive approach from citizens will spontaneously emerge. Historically, traditional crafts were studied in the classroom. In recent years, practical training in local traditional crafts has been

offered as a part of new integrated studies programs. New activities have also been initiated by citizen volunteers, albeit gradually. NPOs sponsor tree-planting projects, responding to the sense of crisis arising from the depletion of domestic raw materials, and provide information about traditional crafts. However, these activities have not dramatically improved the environment surrounding the traditional crafts industry. In order to realize the participation of citizens in the industry, there must be a movement to organically link the respective players, rather than being content to let them play their roles independently.

To link the market and the public, an essayist, Takamori Hiroko, has created a one-room gallery "Space Takamori" using part of a Japanese confectionery store in Tokyo. She has come up with two slogans – "Joining craftspeople and consumers" and "Cultivating the next generation of users" – and is holding an exhibition to familiarize viewers with the traditional crafts and suggest various usages. In the past, next generation users of traditional crafts were nurtured in each household in the course of daily life. However, due to the trend toward the nuclear family as well as changing lifestyles, public understanding of the interaction with time-honored daily wares has become skewed. It is essential to carry on the various methods of usage and enjoyment of traditional crafts in minute detail through communication with users. Craftspeople, many of whom create lacquer ware, as well as others who create woodworks, brushes and bamboo baskets, are taking part in the "Space Takamori" project, and it is regarded as a site for exchange between craftspeople and citizens who wish to incorporate traditional crafts into their daily lives.

On the other hand, productive regions will also have to double their efforts to gain a greater appreciation of consumers' needs. The unique distribution system and the complex division of labor have separated makers from users, and it cannot be denied that the notion of manufacturing has been a source of self-satisfaction on the part of craftspeople. Changes in perceptions of manufacturing are an absolute necessity. As for a breakthrough in this predicament, we would like to rest our hopes on players who have thus far had no contact with the traditional craft industry.

SATO Matomi, a product designer, entered on the scene in the Mino *washi* paper production region in Gifu Prefecture, which boasts a 1,300-year history. He is very demanding: "Until now, products have been crafted with a sense of blind pride in craftspeople's own work. Items made like this are not fit to be commercial products. Craftspeople must produce what the consumer wants. They have not



even considered what segment of the population they are targeting. They have neither the ability nor a sense of how to connect with the market.” In other words, in his opinion, craftspeople have not acquired the common sense needed to conduct business. There was a backlash from those associated with the Mino *washi* industry. Few, if any, can readily accept such a strong denunciation of the ways to which they have long been accustomed. But unless the production regions relinquish their self-satisfaction and do what they must, the momentum of the atrophy will not be halted. In fact, there were 4,000 craftsmen of Mino handmade washi paper 40 years ago, whereas today, there are fewer than 30. According to Sato, until craftspeople and users can reach a mutual understanding, craftspeople are obligated to consider the means by which to improve the products and must generate concepts that inspire products worthy of astonishment. He has pooled the strengths of various people including illustrators, architects, craft designers and “lifestyle” designers, and has organized innovative exhibitions such as “*Kami no Shigoto*” (Paper Utility), “*Okamisukiya no Shojiten*” (Exhibition of Handmade Japanese Paper *Shoji* Screens) and “Nobunaga Style” at the Living Design Center Ozone in Shinjuku in the hope of inciting interest in paper crafts, developing the market, as well as nurturing human resources and generating concepts. The participation of eager young people in their 20’s and 30’s is particularly notable.

Dispelling the traditional structure and constraints that exist in the production regions is not easily accomplished. New players entering the product regions will need to have a tremendous resolve to do battle to effect any changes. Since 2001, the producer system has been implemented in production fields. Designers, table-setting artists and analysts that deal with small and medium-sized enterprises

have entered the production regions and are proving their ability to bring about a new evolution. Of course, not all of the new players are well suited to the production side. For their part, it is important that each production region take a long, hard look at whether the individuals possess both talent and passion. At any rate, this type of system was developed at the government level, and traditional craft industries have been able to receive support for their businesses when producers as well as individuals and organizations involved in the traditional craft industry all take their own initiatives. They should make the most of this system.

“Tradition” is “the perpetuation of innovation” and not the repetition of things done in the past. Unless we attempt new things based on what we have carried out in the past, there can be no bridge to the future. The nurturing of young craftspeople is a vital mission. There are more than a few things that the new players can do to lay bare the problems that exist in the production regions and to provoke a breakthrough in the critical situation faced by the traditional crafts industry. Any conflicts occurring within the production regions may be seen as signs that they are undergoing change. The government should emphasize its support for such movements. Support that facilitates smooth business operation, such as proactive efforts to offer the use of facilities such as traditional industry halls and industrial promotion centers, as well as efficient implementation of support systems, will likely aid the new players.

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