

Japan: Craftsmanship & Modern Technology

– Job Dedication Nurtures Productive Skills –

By Lee Hae Young

EARLIER this year, the Japanese public television network NHK (Japan Broadcasting Corp.) showed a documentary under the title, “The Horseshoe Master and His Disciples” – the story of how two young Japanese men learned horseshoeing skills from their master in the traditional way. The program reminded me of my elementary school days in South Korea. In my hometown, I often saw cows being fitted with metal shoes, their hoofs shaved to shape. In Korea today, such a scene can no longer be seen and I was overwhelmed by nostalgia when I watched the NHK program.

I thought cows were made to wear metal shoes in those days primarily for the sake of cattle tenders. Cows were beasts of burden and metal shoes prevented them from slipping when they walked up stiff slopes tugging heavy ox carts. I found out from the NHK program that was not really so.

The horse that was shown on the TV program did not appear to have any physical deformity, but for some reason the animal could not make right turns. The horseshoe master asked the horse trainer to walk his horse on a concrete pathway in front of his workshop. The horse trotted for about 10m up and down the path. The horseshoe master immediately went about shearing the horse’s hoofs with a file. Soon afterward, an amazing thing happened. In about 20 minutes the horse was able to make turns, both to left and right.

The horse could not make right turns, the viewers were told, because the hoofs had grown out of shape and affected the blood circulation in the calf. The horseshoe master found out the problem just by listening to the sound of the horse’s footsteps. I was totally impressed and realized that only a master could do such a thing.

The horseshoe master, a man in his late 70s, had two twenty-something young men as apprentices. The way the master passed down his skills to his disciples was also interesting. The two youngsters, while helping their master shear the hoofs, simply watched how he did his work. His skills were totally empirical, the sum total of long experience, and the master would find it impossibly difficult to explain his skills in theoretical language. By way of explanation, he grunted his commands, shouting angrily at times, and the young men – at an age when most of their peers would prefer nothing better than having an easy time – listened attentively as they learned the ropes of a traditional art in silence.

Japanese Take Pride in Their Work

I was equally impressed when I watched another NHK program called “Tsurube’s Cheers to the Family.” In that story, an elderly couple grows long green onions in the country and their hope is to have their son, who is an office clerk, take over the family farm. Such a story line is unthinkable in Korea. If the son of a Korean farmer can find a company job in the city, the parents would most likely tell the son to give up farming right away.

In Japan, most people seem to take pride in their

work, whatever their occupation. They do not seem to be too concerned with how much their line of work pays. In Korea, unless you are a business owner, a doctor, a lawyer, or have any such socially well-regarded occupation, few parents would want their children to follow their trade. In my own family, my father had decided that neither I nor my younger brother should become a farmer, and no sooner had we finished our education than he sold the family farm. In one stroke, he removed the idea of farming from our head.

Imagine my surprise when I learned that a certain Japanese lawyer took over his family’s noodle shop after his parents had passed away. In Korea, it would be unimaginable for a lawyer to give up such a socially well-respected

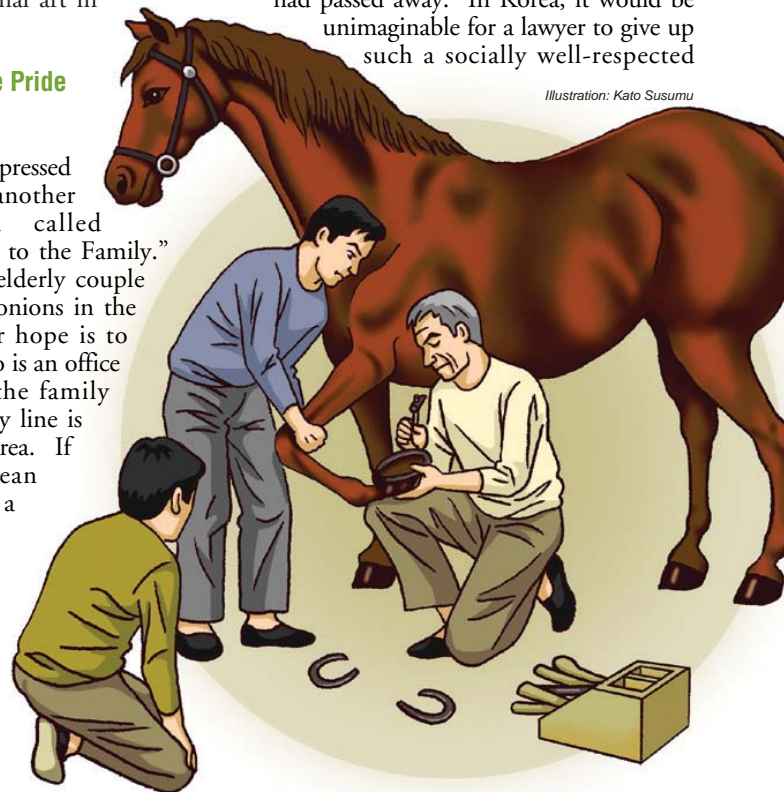


Illustration: Kato Susumu

profession to run a family restaurant. There seem to be numerous examples of this in Japan. There was a story on TV about a man who took over a mom-and-pop candy store that had been run by the family for many years; he could not give up the family tradition even though the store was earning a mere ¥800,000 a year. After many trials and errors, he finally turned the store business around by selling candies on the Internet.

■ Culture of Making Things

The tradition of young Japanese willingly taking over a family business even though they may have graduated from elite universities has bred a spirit of professionalism that, I believe, has served as the driving force to turn Japan into a powerhouse of making things. Today, many youngsters in Japan seem eager to restore ancestral skills and make them adapt to modern ways. The Japanese media have also played an encouraging role by highlighting these efforts.

Of course, this does not mean there has been no spirit of craftsmanship in Korea. Two prominent examples are Koryo blue porcelain and Chosun white porcelain. These fine Korean potteries were very much the essence of craftsmanship. But sadly, there is no longer a single potter in Korea today who has the skills to reproduce these antiques.

Koreans would spare no efforts to pass on the family's treasured craftsmanship to their children. Neither would they actively seek out disciples from outside the family to keep the ancestral skills alive. Hence, ancient Korean craftsmanship has disappeared with the passage of time.

■ Confucianism: Antithesis to Craftsmanship

Korea is a nation deeply rooted by the teachings of Confucius, which tend to look down on artisans and craftsmen. Scholars were the *crème* of society, followed by farmers. Craftsmen and artisans were in the bottom half of society, their status just above that of merchants.

I believe it is this lowly social status of craftsmen and artisans that has stamped out the spirit of craftsmanship in Korea.

During the age of kingdoms, a Chinese-style public examination system instituted in Korea also smothered the spirit of craftsmanship. During the Chosun dynasty (1392-1910), everyone but slaves could climb up the social ladder by excelling in these public exams. Toward the later years of the Chosun era, anyone with money could also acquire a lineage register – the imprimatur of the ruling elite – and move up in social status. Koreans who pursued academic knowledge during the Chosun dynasty were called “*jungin*” or middle-ranked people. Those were people who learned law, foreign language, astronomy and the like. These disciplines were viewed pejoratively at the time as “trivial studies.” People studying these were regarded as low in social status and barred from political power. Transcending one's social class thus became a desperate pursuit for all non-elites in Korea. For this very reason, while Korean blue and white porcelain was highly acclaimed all over the world, Koreans today have lost the skills to reproduce them.

■ World's No.1 Lowly Servant

Compared with Korea, Japan was historically a closed society where birth essentially determined one's social status. Unlike Korea, Japan had not adopted the kind of examination system that offered Koreans opportunities to move up in the social standings. On the other hand, any artisan and craftsman who became a grand master acquired social recognition irrespective of his social class. Thus, every artisan and craftsman worked hard to become the best in the field. There is a famous story in Japan about Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536-1598), the feudal lord who unified Japan. When Hideyoshi was a lowly servant under warlord Oda Nobunaga (1534-1582), he was said to have pledged to become the world's No.1 lowly servant and served loyally under his master.

Shim Soo Kwan, a Korean pottery mas-

ter who was captured and brought to Japan when Hideyoshi invaded Korea in the later years of his rule, established a pottery in the Satsuma region (the present Kagoshima Prefecture), passing the skills through 15 generations over nearly 400 years to this very day. How can a family business last all these centuries? One secret, I believe, lies in the Japanese tradition where a master craftsman finds the meaning of life by elevating their craftsmanship to the realm of divine sublimity.

Some 400 years ago, one Japanese farmer sorted out his farming skills and compiled a farmer's compendium, where he wrote there were 24 strains of wheat, 32 strains of bean and 96 strains of rice in Japan. This is another example of how farmers in Japan too were proud of their work and were imbued with the craftsmanship spirit to become the best in their occupation.

■ Plenty of Shops over a Century

In Japan, there are many shops that have been in business for more than 100 years. Kongo Gumi Co., a Buddhist temple construction firm that went bankrupt last year, was founded in 578. It lasted 1,400 years through 40 generations, and was probably the longest lasting construction firm in the world. In Tokyo's upmarket Ginza district, there is a trade group called the “Ginza Hyakuten-kai,” a society of 100 stores. The Ginza stores that make up this group are all more than 100 years old.

Whether a horseshoer, noodle shop owner or pottery maker, the legacy of history is keenly felt in Japan. People take pride in their work and those who become the best in their field gain social recognition and respect. Here lies the basis for modern Japan to rise as a leading techno-power and as a nation that is totally adept at producing things. So long as this tradition thrives, I believe Japan will remain a manufacturing powerhouse in the future. **JS**

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