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In this month’s Feature, we take a look at how exponents of Japan’s traditional performing arts, crafts and even businesses have adapted their work to the changing times while ensuring the traditions remain true to their defining characteristics.
On July 7 and 8, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe visited Hamburg, Germany and attended the G20 Hamburg Summit.

The theme of this G20 Hamburg Summit was “Shaping an Interconnected World,” and based on that theme the leaders held frank exchanges of views on topics such as how the G20 can coordinate to respond to various downside risks that threaten global economic growth, which is still weaker than desirable, while strengthening that growth.

The G20 is the premier forum for international economic cooperation, and at Session 1, “Economic Growth and Trade,” which dealt with the most important challenges facing the G20, Prime Minister Abe led the leaders’ discussion as the lead speaker.

H.E. Dr. Angela Merkel, Federal Chancellor of Germany, who chaired the Summit, placed particular importance on the issues of countering terrorism and promoting women’s empowerment, and Prime Minister Abe also performed an active role with regard to these two issues by contributing to the discussion in a retreat on countering terrorism, and by participating in an event to launch the Women Entrepreneurs Finance Initiative.

In particular, at Session 1, “Economic Growth and Trade,” where Prime Minister Abe served as the lead speaker, he introduced the latest outcomes of the “three arrows” of Abenomics, and highlighted the ongoing need to use all policy tools – monetary, fiscal and structural. Furthermore, Prime Minister Abe pointed out that in order to ensure that the fruits of economic growth reach all corners of society, it will be important to create a “virtuous cycle of growth and distribution” by promoting innovation and enhanced productivity, along with realizing inclusiveness. A number of leaders expressed support for Prime Minister Abe’s suggestions.

The Hamburg G20 Leaders’ Statement on Countering Terrorism was issued as one of the main outcomes of the Summit. After the Summit meeting, a G20 Leaders’ Statement was adopted.

At this Summit it was decided that Japan will be the G20 Presidency for 2019. Japan will demonstrate even greater leadership in the G20 on the basis of its efforts and contributions at G20 Summits thus far.
A kabuki troupe embracing cutting-edge visual technologies, a painter drawing on age-old spiritual motifs, an iron-forging workshop appealing to completely new markets.... Exponents of Japan’s traditional performing arts, crafts and technologies continue to adapt their work to the changing times while ensuring the traditions remain true to their age-old characteristics.
Yes, it does. After getting up in the morning, our whole family — including the apprentices — would grind out some ink and practice calligraphy before eating breakfast. If the purpose of this calligraphy was to write beautiful characters, then of course if we wrote poorly formed characters it would only be natural to add red ink to them and indicate the correct way of writing them. But my mother never, ever did that. Even if the shape of one of my characters was different from that of the same character the day before, she would say kindly, “This part’s different from yesterday, it looks interesting.” I think that when human beings are praised they instinctively amplify it. And so I would think to myself, let’s do something different again. I think that has led to my own personal way of thinking about the arts today, of wanting to make something different from yesterday, even now.

What are your thoughts on the passing on of traditions, and the evolution of traditional culture?

The reason that evolution exists is because we have the base of tradition. Without the springboard of tradition, then no matter how much we jumped we could never reach the top. Tradition is the basic, fundamental power that allows us to move to the next step, enabling us to jump higher, run sideways, or dive deeper.

If we continue to protect and preserve tradition when we make the next step then it is very reassuring, and it gives us great peace of mind, but there is no evolution there. All it serves to do is to create constraints within ourselves, the idea that...
things must be a certain way, or a particular shape or form.

What do you expect to see from the young generation of people aspiring to get into the arts?
I don’t expect anything [laughs]. The reason for that is, that hoping or having expectations for something forces a certain shape or form upon it. When they get glimpses of that, then people avoid it. For that reason, I make a point of never hoping for – or expecting – anything.

That’s something you’ve experienced yourself, from your calligraphy, isn’t it?
That’s the awareness that I would like to have. The important thing with culture is to not create boring concepts. When a new bud emerges that is different from what we saw yesterday, it is important to have the ability to notice that change, and to lead it steadily into bloom by recognizing and acknowledging it. We don’t need fixed concepts there. A person will always grow and develop when they make use of their intuitive abilities. And if that person expands their dreams, using their own particular applied methods, then they will surely be able to create something interesting.

Even if people who have positioned themselves in the world of traditional arts and culture attempt to carry on the old ways of the past, we are really people of the present; and so I want them to be leaders who show the way forward with new methods that are specialized towards the needs of this current day and age, rather than being dragged back towards the past.

The 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games is an opportunity to appeal to the world about Japanese art and culture, isn’t it?
It’s a fantastic opportunity. I’m thinking of what I call a “tricycle” concept. Let’s say that culture is a unicycle. People who can ride a unicycle are amazing, but there are not that many of them. If we add the economy to this and make it a bicycle, then it creates interesting relationships and increases stability. But unless we continually turn the pedals of our bicycle it will fall over. So, we add tourism to the mix and create a three-wheeled tricycle. A tricycle – consisting of culture, the economy and tourism – is very stable. I want to make culture the front wheel, the leader, in charge of handling. Culture has the power to form links with the economy and to lead the way for tourism, so I am confident that we can create a well-balanced project with total, integrated strength.

What of image do you have of your own role in that project, as Commissioner for Cultural Affairs?
I see myself as a kind of “peddler” for the arts. Picture a street vendor, who loads mountain produce onto his trailer cart and delivers it to the people who live by the sea, then loads his cart up again with ocean produce to take back with him. I have always kept myself constantly in the field, and have devised a diverse range of ways of doing things by considering things from that perspective. Now, I just happen to be playing my part of peddler as Commissioner for Cultural Affairs. I want to fulfill the role of an agent or intermediary for the arts, helping to share the goodness of both the mountains and the ocean with people, so to speak. 

Interview by HITOSHI CHIBA
Kabuki is embracing cutting-edge technology to open new frontiers and make the traditional Japanese theatrical art form accessible to a wider audience.

SAKUSKI UCHIDA

Kabuki has a history spanning more than 400 years. Inscribed on UNESCO’s Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2008, kabuki is one of the major classic theaters of Japan. One company which has played an important role in keeping the art of kabuki alive is Shochiku Co., which is the only production company and promoter of kabuki, and operates the Kabukiza Theatre.

In 2016, Shochiku teamed up with Panasonic Corporation and Nippon Telegraph and Telephone Corporation (NTT) to produce and present a daring production called “KABUKI LION SHI-SHI-O” (The Adventures of the Mythical Lion) and “Cho kabuki: Hanakurabe senbonzakura — Konjyaku kyouen senbonzakura” (Cho [ultra] kabuki: Contest of a thousand cherries — Banquet of a thousand cherries in times past and present)” with DWANGO and NTT. Both productions were acclaimed for the huge potential they demonstrated through their fusion of kabuki and cutting-edge digital technologies. In February 2017, Shochiku received the inaugural Cool Japan Matching Award grand prix, which recognizes excellence in collaborative initiatives between various industries seeking to spread Japanese culture overseas.

Such collaborations are part of a trend. Thanks to new initiatives such as the Super Kabuki plays pioneered by Ichikawa Ennosuke III since 1986 and Nakamura Kanzaburo XVIII’s Heisei Nakamura-za troupe, which has had great success including performances in New York, kabuki is spreading to a wider audience.

Noma Ippei, executive officer in charge of theater development and promotion at Shochiku, presided over the reconstruction of the old Kabukiza Theatre built in 1950 and the opening of Kabukiza Theatre and Kabukiza Tower in 2013. Noma frantically searched for a tenant for the Tower that would help keep Japanese traditional culture and kabuki alive, before DWANGO, which runs Niconico, a Japanese video sharing site, decided to move in. This decision led to the realization of “Cho kabuki.”

“We had a difficult start looking for tenants due...
to the global financial crisis,” says Noma with a wry laugh. “But we caught the attention of DWANGO’s founder and chairman Nobuo Kawakami, and DWANGO decided to move in. DWANGO executives then saw “Super Kabuki II: One Piece” in 2015 and sounded us out about the production at the Niconico Chokaigi festival.”

Niconico Chokaigi, launched and established in 2012 by DWANGO, is an audience participation-style event which recreates Niconico’s virtual world in real life. Held over two days at the Makuhari Messe convention center in Chiba Prefecture, the event showcases a wide variety of content and has proved very popular. In 2017, over 154,000 people visited the event and over 5,059,000 people participated online.

Shochiku decided to collaborate on “Cho kabuki” at the 2016 festival at the request of DWANGO, creating performances with DWANGO starring the popular kabuki actor Nakamura Shido alongside virtual singer Hatsune Miku.

The decision to combine these two apparently disparate genres was based on the common theme of “one thousand cherry trees,” namely Hatsune Miku’s hit song “Senbonzakura” and the kabuki play “Yoshitsune senbon zakura” (Yoshitsune and the thousand cherry trees). However, Nakamura Shido initially knew nothing of Hatsune Miku.

Conscious of the importance of tradition in kabuki, Noma says, “We explained to Shido-san that, because of Shochiku’s involvement, the production would be true to kabuki theory. The actual staging does not stray from the theory either.”

In addition to DWANGO’s special effects, the staging used NTT’s immersive telepresence technology called “Kirari!” which captures images of live actors and transmits real-time holograms of them as acting avatars. The fusion of traditional culture and cutting-edge technology is a new form of expression and the main attraction of the productions but at the same time it is also the part which is called into question.

According to Noma, “This doesn’t apply to cutting-edge technology alone, but it all boils down to ensuring that creators do not become complacent and to asking ourselves how we can communicate with audiences in a way they can understand.”

In these collaborative productions, Noma received a certain reaction that showed the creators’ feelings were being communicated to the audience. In kabuki theater, at the climax of a play the spectators call out the house name, or yago (stage name) of the actors in praise of their performance. At the collaborative productions, spectators shouted out “Yorozu-ya!” (House of Yorozu) for Nakamura Shido, “Hatsune-ya!” (House of Hatsune) for Hatsune Miku, and then “denwa-ya!” (House of NTT) for Kirari!’s performance.

In April 2016, a performance of “KABUKI LION SHI-SHI-O, ” with the popular kabuki actor Ichikawa Somegoro playing the lead, was held in Las Vegas in the United States. The first part of the localized kabuki play was performed digitally with the actors delivering part of their monologues in English. The nagauta, the songs which accompany the kabuki theater, were also partly sung in English. The performance was a hit, with many in the audience seeing kabuki for the first time.

According to Noma, one of Shochiku’s primary objectives for trying a new form of kabuki theater was to broaden kabuki’s audience base. “I think it’s good to have a diverse theater-going population. Also, in terms of bringing people from overseas into contact with kabuki ahead of 2020 when Tokyo hosts the Olympics and Paralympics, we hope that many different kinds of people come to see kabuki.”

Shochiku has been staging kabuki theater productions overseas for nine decades since 1928. It is now harnessing this experience to pursue the huge potential of the genre in 2020 and beyond. 🇯🇵
ETERNAL NOH

Noh (or nogaku) – sometimes referred to as “an art for communicating” or “the art of the calming souls” – is one of Japan’s representative traditional performing arts. We asked Kanze Kiyokazu, 26th Grand Master of the Kanze School, to explain the essence of noh.

KYOKO MOTOYOSHI

NoH was founded in the fourteenth century. It is a traditional performing art that is unique to Japan, and is also referred to as the world’s oldest stage art still performed today. A form of musical drama in which the story plays out along with traditional shosa (dancing) and utai (chanting of a noh text), noh differs greatly from stage performances that are designed for simple entertainment. Noh performances very strongly reflect the spirituality and religious values of the Japanese people. In 2008, noh was inscribed to UNESCO’s Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (as Nogaku theatre).

Noh was formalized as a stage art by Kan’ami and his son, Zeami, and the Kanze School – currently the largest school in noh, with round 700 nogakushi (noh performers) – draws on the long-standing tradition established by these two founders. Kanze Kiyozaku, the 26th Grand Master to lead the Kanze School, elucidates the true essence of noh.

“Noh is sometimes referred to as ‘the art of calming souls.’ The fundamental root that lies at the heart of that is the act of holding a memorial for people who have passed away. At their root, even the most joyous and auspicious programs have the notion of cherishing the memory of those who have died in the past, and are instilled with imagination and blessings for the future.”

Kanze goes on to say that noh is also “an art for communicating,” in the same way as the Japanese tea ceremony or ikebana (traditional Japanese flower arranging). Every movement is deliberate, unwavering and free of waste. Chiseling down unnecessary waste to the extreme and discovering beauty in the remaining core is held to be one of the distinguishing characteristics of the Japanese arts. There at the root – Kanze says – lies the supple, soft and gentle emotional mindset that is referred to as yamato-gokoro, the Japanese spirit.
Noh is performed wearing omote masks called noh-men, of which there are said to be around 250 different types. Many supernatural beings make appearances that include spirits, heavenly nymphs, ghosts, and the horned demoness; a woman possessed with jealousy and grudge. Zeami brought a wide variety of figures to the noh stage, portraying the emotions of people from all levels of society and walks of life; from tragic samurai warriors to conquering generals, from emperors to aristocrats, all the way down to the common people. The reason why Zeami made so many different people appear on his stage, explains Kanze, is that “in addition to calming the souls of the dead, Zeami wanted to portray humanity itself.”

“For example, he brings people to the stage who have fallen into the depths of hell, and allows them to relive the most splendid moments of their lives once again on stage... From this we can feel the kindness of Zeami, who made stories like this and acted them out himself.”

In addition to carrying on the traditions of noh in this way, Kanze Kiyokazu is also engaged in initiatives such as performing overseas and creating new noh plays. In July 2016, he and his company were invited, as one of the most outstanding stage performances selected from around the world, to perform at the 20th Lincoln Center Festival held in New York. After their performance, they were met with an endless standing ovation. In 2012, Kanze and his performers gave their first performance of The Conversion of Saint Paulo, a Christian noh play, entralling audiences with a stage performance unlike any before. (Christian noh plays were adapted from the bible in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries when many Christian missionaries came to Japan.)

“When watching noh, please try expanding your imagination. I think that from noh, even people who have never read classical Japanese literature, and even those who don’t understand the Japanese language, can still get a feeling for the spirituality of the Japanese people.”

The Kanze School of noh was recognized by the people in power at the time, and developed. In 1633, the Kanze family received premises covering approximately 1,650m² in Tokyo’s Ginza District from Tokugawa Iemitsu, the third shogun of the Tokugawa dynasty. The Kanze School made this land their headquarters. Later in its history, however, the School returned this received land to Tokugawa Yoshinobu, who was the last shogun of the Tokugawa dynasty.

In April 2017, a new Kanze Noh Theatre was born in Ginza. The theatre is located on the third basement floor of Ginza Six: Ginza’s largest shopping and entertainment complex.

“Until March 2015, the Kanze Noh Theater was located in the residential district of Shoto in Shibuya Ward, Tokyo, but there were concerns over the deteriorating condition of the structure and its resistance to earthquakes. We put our hands in when we heard about the redevelopment of the Ginza 6-chome area, and our return to Ginza — with its deep historical connections to the origins of the Kanze School — finally became a reality. We also hold nighttime showings on weekdays, so we hope that people will come to enjoy our noh plays casually, perhaps even on their way home from work.”

The Kanze Noh Theatre aims to be a place where not only Japanese people but also non-Japanese visitors can casually enjoy noh performances. Based on that wish, the theatre is also planning to introduce IT-driven infrastructure and facilities to offer multilingual support in the near future.
Awaji ningyo joruri (Awaji puppet theater) has a history of over 500 years and is a designated Important Intangible Folk Cultural Property of Japan. Originating as its name suggests on the island of Awaji in Hyogo Prefecture, this form of puppet theater spread throughout the country to become a traditional Japanese performing art. Often invited to perform overseas, the Awaji Puppet Theater Company has also influenced creators far beyond Japan’s shores.

Ningyo joruri generally involves the interplay of shamisen, which produces deep tones when its three strings are plucked with a bachi (plectrum), the joruri (narrative) of the tayu (chanters), who describe the emotions of the various characters and tell the story, and the puppets, which portray human relationships as though they are actually alive.

In the eighteenth century, ningyo joruri was hugely popular, and numerous puppet theater troupes, big and small, were formed and became much loved by ordinary people.

Traditional puppet theater is said to have its roots in the aforementioned Awaji ningyo joruri of Awaji Island. Awaji Island once had over forty puppet theater groups, which toured throughout Japan spreading ningyo joruri. Bunraku, the most famous form of ningyo joruri today, has its roots in Awaji.

However, once so popular, ningyo joruri has been in decline more recently, pushed out by various forms of entertainment and culture. In the first half of the twentieth century, even Awaji ningyo joruri started to die out. However, thanks to the efforts of people who wanted to preserve the tradition, the Awaji Puppet Theater Company was formed in 1964 and, with the cooperation of one city and ten villages (now three cities), the Association of Awaji Ningyo Joruri was established. The Awaji Puppet Theater Company has since been invited to perform in a total of thirty-five countries, including Russia, the United States and countries in Europe, Asia and Oceania, and has been highly acclaimed throughout the world.

What Is Awaji Ningyo Joruri?
Awaji Puppet Theater Company manager Chiaki Bando explains some of the background to Awaji ningyo joruri.

“One of the features of Awaji ningyo joruri is that it is strongly colored by Shinto rituals. The lives of the people on Awaji have always revolved around farming and fishing and have been greatly affected by nature, and the puppets were used to appease the gods. The Ebisu-mai (Ebisu puppet dance) that is performed at fishermen’s festivals for example has been passed down from generation to generation.

“The puppets used in these Shinto rituals were
combined with the shamisen and a spoken narrative, and Awaji ningyo joruri was born. On Awaji Island, the custom of performing the Shiki Sanbaso Dance at shrines to mark Japanese New Year still survives today.

“Another feature of Awaji ningyo joruri is the large size of the puppets, which can be up to 170 cm tall (the puppets used in bunraku by contrast are typically around two-thirds human size). When three puppeteers manipulate this puppet, breathing as one, a life-size puppet starts to move about the stage. The subtlety of the emotions of each puppet is also surprising. They move their eyes from left to right, raise their eyebrows in anger, open their mouths and laugh... the puppets express emotions with extreme subtlety, at times, dynamically. The heads are made of hinoki (cypress) and kiri (paulownia) wood and the hollowed-out inside houses the strings and other mechanisms that make the eyebrows, eyes and mouth move. The part which moves the string-pulling device is called the kozaru.

“Originally, small puppets were apparently manipulated by one puppeteer but, with the demand for more powerful plays, the puppets are said to have changed dramatically.

“Flashy performances which surprise and entertain audiences while at the same time maintaining the flavor of a Shinto ritual can also be said to be characteristic of Awaji ningyo joruri. This includes hayagawari (quick changes of costume), where the costumes of the puppets and the puppeteers change in an instant, and odogu gaeshi (change of setting), where the background of the stage gradually changes and finally a space which looks like a great hall of one thousand tatami mats appears.

“Awaji ningyo joruri has also influenced creators overseas. For example, Julie Taymor, director of the Broadway musical The Lion King, visited the Awaji Puppet Theater to train for around one month after graduating university in 1974. The Lion King scene in which the two lions lean forward to confront each other incorporates movements used in puppet theater to express anger by drawing close to the other person.

“Today, children living on Awaji Island learn about the Awaji ningyo joruri in play groups and junior high school and high school club activities. As members of the Awaji Puppet Theater Company, we are also involved in these lessons. We would like to preserve this 500-year-old tradition and ensure that it is passed on to the next generation,” says Bando.

The Awaji Puppet Theater Company has around twenty members. At the theater completed in 2012, they perform four times a day, every day except Wednesday when the theater is closed. Every year, 50,000 people come to the theater. Once in danger of dying out, this traditional performing art is once again in the limelight.
The continuation and advancement of the Japanese traditional performing arts does not only take place by direct succession, from parent to child or master to apprentice. The traditional arts are also supported by human resources development programs, in which successors are recruited from the general public.

TAKASHI SASAKI

In Japan, from historical times, various artistic skills had been passed down directly, from parent to child, or from master to apprentice. Sometimes referred to as direct transmission, this passing on of knowledge and skills is not only limited to the arts, and in the past it was taken for granted as common practice in the worlds of martial arts, academic study and craftsmanship. The traditions of various arts and crafts were carefully protected and passed down through the ages, transcending generations and eras.

In recent years, however, this system of direct transmission has come to face a significant problem: a shortage of successors.

In order to overcome problems such as this, from 1970, the Japan Arts Council started courses called Personnel Training for Successors of Traditional Performing Arts for the purpose of fostering human resources who will carry on the traditional performing arts, recruiting successors widely from the general public. The Council is the parent organization for numerous theaters, including the National Theatre of Japan, the National Noh Theatre, the National Bunraku Theatre, the National Theatre Okinawa and the New National Theatre, Tokyo. In addition to hosting performances of traditional and contemporary Japanese stage arts at these theaters, the Council is also engaged in various initiatives for the development of human resources involved in these arts, which it regards as an important pillar of its activities. Currently, the Council is conducting successor development training courses in nine different areas, including kabuki, noh, bunraku puppet theater and other popular entertainments.

Kabuki Training

At the venue for the kabuki actors’ training course, the harsh voice of the instructor booms across the wide, wooden-floored rehearsal room.

“It’s no good trying to memorize it with your head! Move your bodies in time with the sound of the shamisen.”

“We don’t try to make a sound by stamping our feet. The tapping sound comes from lowering your feet naturally,” says Nakamura Tokizo V.

Photo: Yuichi Itabashi

[Image]
The tapping sound comes from lowering your feet naturally.”

The instructor teaching this part of the kabuki actors’ course is Nakamura Tokizo V; a male actor who has gained many fans playing a graceful tateyama, the lead female-role actor in kabuki. In 2010, he was awarded the Medal with Purple Ribbon for his outstanding contributions to the Japanese arts and culture. The young trainees seem undaunted by the harsh instruction of this famous actor, and not one of them appears depressed or discouraged. All of them nod sincerely, with serious looks in their eyes, focused intently on their instructor’s every move.

The Japan Arts Council recruits new applicants for its courses for the development of successors to the traditional performing arts once every two or three years depending on the course, targeting young people (who must have graduated junior high school) aged between 15 and 23. Currently, there are nine young people attending the kabuki actors’ training seminar, for what is the course’s 23rd intake. The course curriculum essentially runs from 10.00 AM to 6.00 PM on weekdays, cramming in as much content as possible. Aside from the main topic of kabuki, participants study over twenty other subjects, including practical skills in other Japanese traditional arts, such as gidayu-bushi (musical narratives for puppet theater) and nagauta (literally “long songs” — traditional music that accompanies kabuki theater); as well as lectures in manners, how to put on traditional Japanese kimonos, and even the history of arts and entertainment. Trainees have this broad range of knowledge and skills drummed into them over an intensive period of one year and ten months.

After covering Nakamura Tokizo V’s practice instruction, we spoke with Nakamura Kamenojo; a kanbu (senior)-ranked actor who is also a lecturer on the training course. Kamenojo was a trainee himself, in the course’s second intake, completing his training in 1974.

“My parents liked kabuki, so I myself came to have aspirations towards the world of kabuki from a young age, too. But if it wasn’t for this program, then I am 100% sure that someone like myself — who was born and raised in a regular family — could never have become a kabuki actor,” says Kamenojo.

Even today, the traditional system of hereditary succession remains strong not only in the world of kabuki, but also in the other traditional Japanese performing arts. Children who are born and raised in the home of a kabuki actor naturally learn the traditions and conventional practices of kabuki from a young age, and gain onstage experience as child actors. This creates an overwhelming gap between them and those raised in regular family households. Despite this, Kamenojo says that he has never considered this to be a handicap.

“I have never once felt that it was a hardship; not even during my days as a trainee, when I had to learn all the basics of kabuki in a short period of time, or when I was undergoing my introductory training under my master after I had completed the course. I think that, more than anything, it was because the joy of being able to learn about my beloved kabuki from the greatest people in the business at the time was so great,” he says with a smile.

Fifty years have now passed since the launch of the training program. Currently, past trainees account for around 30% of the kabuki actors who are active on the stage today. There are kabuki actors, like Kamenojo, who have been promoted through the ranks from nadaishita to nadai, up to the senior rank of kanbu; today becoming integral and indispensable members of the Japanese kabuki world.

When viewed in terms of the over 400-year-long historical tradition of kabuki, this successor development program has only just begun, but it already plays a crucial role, providing strong support for the traditions of kabuki.
Miwa Komatsu, a young artist whose work depicts the “divine beasts” that dwell within her tradition-loving heart, is drawing the attention of the world.

TETSU MIZUNO

Japanese artist Miwa Komatsu first captured the public’s interest in 2006, at the age of 22, with the unveiling of her copperplate print “49 Days.” Since then she has been active both at home and abroad, continuing to release works that shine light upon the traditional arts and craftwork of Japan, interpreted in her own unique style.

In 2015, her “Guardian Lion Dogs: Heaven and Earth” (a pair of figurines based on the komainu lion-dogs that are traditionally placed at the entrances of Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples in Japan) became a major topic of discussion when they were exhibited as part of a show garden at the British Royal Horticultural Society’s Chelsea Flower Show in the United Kingdom. The figurines were created in a collaboration with the seventh-generation owner of the historic Yazaemon Kiln, producers of Arita porcelain, one of Japan’s most famous and representative varieties of ceramic ware. Komatsu finished her lion-dog figurines in a contemporary style utilizing Edo-period (1603–1867) decorative patterns. In October of that year, the British Museum made the decision to store and exhibit the figurines, applauding their strong and powerful impact, expressiveness and sense of presence. In November, Komatsu was asked to submit another of her works — entitled “Guardian Lion of Historic Ruins” — for auction at Christie’s. The painting sold for a considerable sum of money.

The two themes that appear consistently in Komatsu’s style of artwork are shinju (divine beasts) and prayer. The divine beasts are guardian creatures such as the Sphinx of ancient Egypt or the lions of Mesopotamia or India. In the case of Japan, they are the shishi (sacred guardian lions) that were brought to the country in ancient times together with Buddhism. It is said that over the course of the early Heian period (794–1192), these shishi transformed into the komainu lion-dogs that can still be seen today, at the entrances of many shrines and temples throughout Japan. “Shinju are familiar creatures that connect our human world with the world of the gods,” says Komatsu. By visiting various places around the world to see the divine beasts that represent the origins of Japan’s lion-dogs, and to see people praying, Komatsu says that she has come to value wa, or Japanese harmony, even more greatly.

In 2012, Komatsu participated in Fudo Co., a company that is working to develop traditional Japanese arts and crafts into a global brand under the slogan of “Made in Japan.” Through her participation in this...
endeavor, Komatsu met various Japanese craftspeople, including the producers of Hakata-ori woven fabrics, Arita porcelain, and long-standing Kyoto-based kimono makers, and accelerated the pace of her collaborations.

From April 2014, Komatsu went to live in the city of Izumo—a place in Shimane Prefecture that is referred to as “the Land of the Gods” — and began working on a piece of artwork themed around the perceptions of the universe and cultural climate that she drew from Izumo Grand Shrine. The following May, she donated the completed work, “Shin Fudoki,” to the shrine. The painting is now on display in the shrine’s Shinkoden treasure hall.

Through these kinds of art-producing activities, the feelings of wa within Komatsu’s heart have become stronger and surer than ever before. The words that she now heralds as her slogan are these: Yamato Power, to the World.

“The essence of yamatojikara – Yamato power – is the ability to mix and unify various different things; the power to combine elements that have been passed down through Japanese tradition, to create something original and unique, and to communicate that to the world once again,” she says.

During her exhibition held in the Akasaka district of Tokyo in June 2017, Komatsu held a live painting session, in which she painted on a canvas in front of an audience of spectators.

Surrounded by over 100 tubes of acrylic paint, Komatsu kneeled before the canvas in a formal seize position. She meditated to increase her state of mental concentration, before standing up in front of the canvas and beginning to move her brush. She transferred the colors directly from the tubes to the canvas, taking the paint in her hands from a container and throwing it at the canvas surface, before gently stroking it with her hands, making a few strokes with her brush and then adding more colors. The 300-plus spectators who filled the venue breathlessly watched over her every move.

Eventually, Komatsu painted a circle on the floor with radiating lines extending from it. She then proceeded to mix and blend the lines of paint together with both hands, before finally sitting down again in seize position at the center of the circle and bowing deeply to the audience, thus concluding her hour-long live painting session.

Komatsu is planning further exhibitions in Taiwan (in December–January 2018) and Hong Kong (in February–March). “I think that komainu are the identity of Japan and of wider Asia,” she says.

It may be an exaggeration to say that Komatsu represents the renaissance of modern-day Heisei-period Japan, but at the center of this artist’s heart is the spirit of Japanese harmony, and the massive presence of what she calls Yamato power.
NGK Insulators was established in 1919 as an independent enterprise specializing in electrical insulators. From the time of its establishment, NGK had supported Japan’s electrical power infrastructure through the manufacture of insulators. Since the turning point of the economic depression during the 1960s, however, the company has sought to diversify its business activities, and has worked to establish operations in new business domains.

Currently, NGK’s main business areas are energy, ecology and electronics. What underpins these, however, is the original ceramic technology that NGK has developed through its experiences in manufacturing special high-voltage insulators. One set of products that is representative of this is NGK’s HONEYCERAM® range of honeycomb-structured ceramic catalyst carriers; ceramic exhaust gas purification components for the automotive industry.

NGK began its research and development efforts towards the creation of HONEYCERAM in 1971. This was right around the time when the problem of pollutant exhaust gas emissions began to surface.

At the time, the mainstream form of exhaust gas purifier was the pallet type, in which the catalyst was applied as a coating to a granular ceramic base. Pallet-type purifiers made it easy to carry out periodic replacements, but they also had several drawbacks; including the fact that the ceramic granules would rub together (which caused the catalyst to be rubbed off), and the fact that it was difficult for the exhaust gas to flow smoothly through them.

NGK took up the challenge of creating honeycomb-structured components by extruding cylindrically shaped ceramic using the “extrusion” technique, a traditional ceramic forming technique which NGK had developed through its experiences in manufacturing electrical insulators.

The end result was the HONEYCERAM design, with its single-piece tubular construction. Because the inside of the tube was finely divided into a thinly walled honeycomb structure, the surface area coated with catalyst was greater than for conventional pallet-type purifiers, and the design therefore achieved a superior level of exhaust gas purification efficiency.

In January 1976, NGK finally succeeded in completing a suitably convincing sample with wall thickness of 12 mil (approx. 0.3 mm) and 300 cells. The sample was immediately flown out by air freight to the US automotive manufacturer Ford Motor Company for evaluation testing. NGK’s research institute waited anxiously for the results. Eventually, in April 1976, they received a telex message that read “TEST RESULTS EXCELLENT & PERFECT!” Ford subsequently decided to place the very first order for NGK’s HONEYCERAM exhaust purifiers.

“Because our HONEYCERAM purifiers are automotive components, there is a need to produce large volumes of them to the same standard, and with a high degree of precision. However, because ceramics
are fired they are not only subject to shrinking, but also have a tendency to deform easily. We therefore fire them using our own proprietary techniques to ensure that they maintain their shape,” explains Aki Sawafuji, PR spokesperson for NGK.

The basic structure of HONEYCERAM has not changed since NGK first entered production in 1976. However, NGK has improved (i.e. reduced) the thickness of the walls dividing the individual cells, and increased total numbers of cells in its designs, from the original 12 mil / 300 cells down to 2 mil (0.05mm) / 900 cells.

“The walls of HONEYCERAM are porous. The more pores there are, the greater the surface area coated with catalyst will be, and the more the exhaust-gas-purifying performance of our ceramics will improve. On the other hand, the greater the number of pores, the more structurally brittle the ceramic will become. We are therefore continuing to develop products in search of an optimal degree of porosity that will offer both strong resilience to shocks and high exhaust-gas-purifying performance,” explains Sawafuji. NGK now has production locations in the United States, Europe, Asia and Africa, and total cumulative production has now reached in excess of 1.4 billion units worldwide.

In the energy field, NGK achieved the world’s first practical realization of a megawatt-class NAS® (sodium-sulfur) battery-based electrical power storage system, overturning the common thinking that “power cannot be stored.”

NAS batteries essentially consist of a negative electrode of sodium (Na), a positive electrode of sulfur (S) and a fine ceramic electrolyte between the two electrodes, and can be repeatedly recharged and discharged. Despite their large storage capacity, they are relatively compact in size, have high energy density and are capable of stable supply of electrical power over extended periods of time. They can therefore contribute to increasing the stability of renewable energy systems, electricity-saving measures, reducing energy costs and decreasing the burden on the environment.

The fundamental principle behind NAS batteries was presented in the United States, but although research and development efforts had been conducted both in Japan and overseas, they had yet to result in a practical realization. The key to achieving mass production lay in the use of a beta-alumina solid electrolyte between the positive and negative electrodes. NGK made this breakthrough with its own proprietary ceramic technology, and eventually arrived at a business-ready commercialization in 2002.

Today, in addition to being used as emergency power supplies, NAS batteries have been introduced for other applications, including energy adjustment applications for smart-grid and island-based micro-grid dispersed power supplies at locations such as Kashiwa-no-ha Smart City in Chiba Prefecture and the Oki Islands (an archipelago in the Sea of Japan). They have also been deployed overseas, such as in southern Italy, where they are used to ensure efficient delivery of power generated using renewable energy technologies to the northern part of the country (where the demand for electricity is greatest) using existing power transmission lines.

In terms of their applications in increasing the stability of renewable energy systems, for which there are considerable expectations for full-scale operation in the future, NAS batteries have been installed at locations such as the wind power plant at the village of Rokkasho in Aomori Prefecture, and the photovoltaic mega solar power plant in Wakkanai, Hokkaido.

NGK’s product development continues to evolve. Other examples include the development of ceramic-based secondary batteries for wearable devices, zinc-type secondary cells, and gallium nitride (GaN) wafers that will enable the creation of ultra-high brightness lasers and LEDs, the like of which have never been seen before.
The easiest way to find Munemichi Myochin’s inconspicuous workshop is to walk around the Idei district to the northeast of historic Himeji Castle and open your ears.

If you cannot hear the repeated clank of hammer beating metal, you will almost certainly catch the delicate tones of the product that Munemichi and his third son, Keizo, craft at the Myochin family business in Himeji City, Hyogo Prefecture.

By themselves those creations, known as “hibashi furin,” appear modest, resembling long, blunt nails or impractically weighty chopsticks.

But the timbre of these unique cast iron furin, or wind chimes, has won admirers far and wide, among them some giants of the music world, including Stevie Wonder and electronica pioneer Isao Tomita.

Indeed, Tomita was so taken with the chimes that until his death in 2016, he paid visits to the Myochin workshop for over forty years. “Tomita-sensei told me that his goal was to make music like these wind chimes,” says Munemichi. “I felt extremely humbled that such a great man would say that.”

The story of the evolution of the wind chimes is as unusual as the wind chimes themselves and if it was not entirely by chance that the Myochins started manufacturing them, it was certainly out of necessity.

“Hibashi” actually translates as “fire chopsticks,” a reference to the items that the Myochin family formerly crafted since the 1860s.

“Even when I was a child, we used charcoal-burning braziers for heating and we made hibashi to pick up the hot coals,” says Munemichi, who started

ROB GILHOOLY

The beautiful sound of Myochin’s hibashi furin wind chimes has attracted the attention of such world-famous musicians as Stevie Wonder and electronica pioneer Isao Tomita.

Munemichi Myochin’s family has been in the iron forging business for over 850 years. The company’s output has changed with the times, but one characteristic of its work has remained constant.

Clarity of Purpose

Munemichi Myochin's family has been in the iron forging business for over 850 years. The company's output has changed with the times, but one characteristic of its work has remained constant.
working under his father fifty-seven years ago. “Then, in the 1960s oil heaters came in and demand for hibashi petered out. It was really a case of do or die.”

This wasn’t the first time the Myochins faced such a dilemma. Munemichi’s ancestors have been in the iron forging business for over 850 years, formerly making suits of armor for samurai warriors and their daimyo (feudal lord). However, Japan’s Meiji Restoration (1868) saw the abolishment of feudal fiefdoms and within a matter of years demand for armor ceased.

Consequently, the Myochins sought a new line of business and, keen to continue the forging technologies that the family had cultivated, they applied it to the manufacture of hibashi, metal tongs.

The more recent company reinvention to producing wind chimes once more proved the old adage that necessity is the mother of invention.

“Well-forged steel produces a nice sound when struck and in the Taisho period (1912–1926) there was even a novel that mentioned the lovely timbre of the hibashi,” explains Munemichi’s second son, Munehiro, who makes katana, traditional Japanese swords. “So in order to survive we readjusted our business objective once more. Yet, regardless which direction we have taken, sound has been an important component for our company.”

Creating wind chimes that achieve that sound is no easy task.

“With these chimes, a nice shape alone is not enough,” Munemichi explains. “The metal has to be at the optimum temperature when you forge it to ensure that the best sound quality can be achieved. I judge that temperature entirely by color. When the metal turns to a whitish hue, that’s when we remove it from the furnace and start the forging. That’s the secret of the sound,” says Munemichi Myochin.

To produce an acceptable sound from the wind chimes takes years of intensive work experience.

The Myochin family recently added titanium wind chimes to their product range.

Maintaining traditional techniques but evolving them with the times, the Myochin family’s business approach is typical of Japan’s long-established companies.
In December 2016, the PaperLab A-8000 – the world’s first¹ dry-process office papermaking system – was introduced to the market. Because used paper generated in offices often contains confidential information, it is common to outsource the disposal process to a paper recycler. This new product was developed by Epson (Suwa, Nagano Prefecture), a manufacturer known mainly for products such as inkjet printers and projectors. PaperLab is an epoch-making product that produces new paper using office waste paper as a raw material after completely destroying all document information. Shigeo Fujita, manager of the PaperLab Business Project at Epson, explains the story behind the product development.

“One of our main products is inkjet printers for office and home use. Paper used for printing is a limited resource, however. As a manufacturer dealing with paper, we believe that we need to make a significant contribution to a Sound Material-Cycle Society more than ever,” says Fujita.

Portable and ideal for writing down notes and ideas, paper is an indispensable tool for enhancing creativity and memory. On the other hand, however, a certain amount of space is required to store large quantities of paper documents and there is also the potential danger of information leaks.

“How can we eliminate people’s concerns about these negative aspects of paper use and encourage them to use paper? The PaperLab office papermaking system was created to solve this issue,” Fujita explains.

Whether it is high-quality paper that does not use any recycled materials or recycled paper, one cup of water is generally required to produce a single A4 sheet of paper. Office environments, however, are not equipped with sufficient water supplies to produce paper. For this reason, Epson used its own original mechanism to develop a new technology called Dry Fiber Technology, which does not require

*¹ As of November 2016, it is the world’s first dry-process office papermaking system (according to Epson).
water*2 in the papermaking process – this is the most prominent feature of PaperLab.

According to Fujita, PaperLab applies mechanical pressure to used paper to break it down into paper fibers. This process completely destroys all document information. It then adds binding materials to the defiberized material, applies pressure, and forms the material to regenerate new paper.

“Every process - including defiberizing, binding, and forming - is entirely different from the conventional papermaking method. This was why we had to go through a lot of trial and error in research and development. Furthermore, we had to take full account of usability and safety for customers when using it as office equipment. All of these requirements took us five years from the beginning of the development phase to the product launch.”

Despite its compact size, with a width of less than three meters, PaperLab can produce about 720 sheets of A4 paper per hour, that is, one sheet every five seconds. It costs 0.45 yen (0.0044 US dollars) to make one piece of A4 paper*3, while one piece of A4 copy paper sells for about 0.45 yen to 0.7 yen. Moreover, by adding color to the binding material, the user can produce various types of colored paper. It is also possible to make thick paper used for business cards and more.

“A large amount of paper is consumed in offices. If you can produce the required amount of paper as you need it in your office, you can significantly reduce the amount of paper you purchase. You can also cut down on the transportation needed for the procurement of new paper and recycling. This contributes to the reduction of CO2 emissions. PaperLab is also highly appreciated by people in charge of managing corporate information because it allows them to recycle used paper without taking it out of the office,” Fujita says.

Private-sector companies and local governments in Japan have now started to introduce PaperLab. The cities of Shiojiri and Suwa, where some of Epson’s large offices and plants are based, introduced PaperLab at an early stage, with mayors of both cities using business cards made by PaperLab.

Since PaperLab was announced to the public, the company has received numerous inquiries from overseas, including European countries, which are known for their high environmental consciousness, and India and the Middle East, where water is a precious resource.

In the era of digitization, paper will continue to be an indispensable medium for our communication. PaperLab suggests the possibility of bringing a completely new value and future to paper. The considerable interest in PaperLab, both at home and overseas, is indicative of a strong interest in the environment.  

*2 It uses a small amount of water to maintain a certain level of humidity inside the system.
*3 This includes only the cost of the expendable Paper Plus binder. It does not include the amortization of PaperLab A-8000 or electric and water bills.
Renzendoruji Gantukus came to Japan from Mongolia to pursue a career as a sumo wrestler. Today he trains young enthusiasts of the sport—both Mongolian and Japanese.

KUMIKO SATO

TOTTORI Johoku High School in Tottori Prefecture is a prestigious high school for sumo wrestling. The advisor for the school’s sumo club is a Mongolian man named Renzendoruji Gantukus. Every year the high school accepts Mongolian students. Many of the students taught by Gantukus have successfully moved on to a professional career in the sport in Japan. In recognition of his achievements, the Mongolian president awarded Gantukus the Order of Altangadas (the Polar Star) this past May.

“The award ceremony was held at the Mongolian Embassy. Some of the wrestlers I had taught attended. I was also surprised and really glad to see Hakuho, my best friend and the 69th yokozuna,” says Gantukus.

Yokozuna is the highest rank in the hierarchy (banzuke) of professional sumo wrestlers. In recent years, Mongolians have dominated the sport of sumo. Starting with Asashoryu, who became the 68th yokozuna in 2003, four of the last five yokozuna have been Mongolian. (The 72nd wrestler to be promoted to the top rank, in January 2017, is Japanese.) Gantukus was among the Mongolians who came to Japan almost at the same time as Hakuho, dreaming of becoming a yokozuna.

Gantukus’ aspiration to become a sumo wrestler dates back to his childhood, when he won the third

Teaching Japan’s National Sport

This summer, the sumo club of Tottori Johoku High School is focused on winning the Inter High School Sports Festival for the second consecutive year. Gantukus’ teaching will become even more renowned. Photo: YUICHI ITABASHI

Former wrestler Renzendoruji Gantakus from Mongolia is now an advisor to one of Japan’s top school sumo clubs. Photo: YUICHI ITABASHI
place at a Bökh (Mongolian wrestling) championship meet. The coach of the sumo club of Tottori Johoku High School had attended because Tottori Prefecture has a sister city relationship with Töv, Gantukus’ hometown. The coach discovered Gantukus’s talent and suggested that he come to Japan to train as a sumo wrestler. His mother was opposed to the suggestion. She loved Gantukus very much because he was the youngest of her six sons. However, his father and brothers supported the suggestion and Gantukus decided to go to Japan in March 2000. He was 15 years old.

Gantukus experienced difficulties such as the language barrier, new food and differences between Bökh and sumo. Despite these factors, he kept trying to improve and won fifth place in the singles tournament at the National Sports Festival in his second year of high school. As a third-year student, he was a regular at team competitions and won every major national meet.

Japanese sumo wrestling does not have weight restrictions. A small wrestler beating a larger one is one of the highlights of the sport. Since Gantukus was physically small, his favorite winning techniques were shitatenage (underarm throw) and shitatehineri (twisting underarm throw). These look very dynamic because they involve throwing a large opponent by getting under his upper body. However, it has a heavy physical burden. Gantukus suffered a bone displacement injury in his neck. He had to decide whether or not to undergo a serious operation. In the end, he gave up pursuing a professional career and moved on to amateur sumo wrestling, which has weight restrictions. Later, he received an offer from his alma mater for a job teaching young sumo wrestlers.

“The boys from Mongolia are all very weak at first. But as I teach them, they become stronger, as if they have become different men. This makes me feel the joy and wonder of teaching,” says Gantukus. “The boys from Mongolia are away from their home country and families. By learning many things, they become tougher mentally as well as in terms of their sumo skills. This also stimulates the Japanese boys and they positively influence each other.”

Gantukus is usually called “Gan Sensei” by his students (“sensei” is a term of respect meaning “teacher”). He is kind-hearted and endearing. In training, however, he is very stern. Japanese martial arts place an emphasis on respect. For example, it is said that judo begins and ends with respect. Sumo is particularly strict about its manners and behavior, partly because the sport originated from shrine rituals.

Gantukus says he had confronted the hard reality in the first days after he came to Japan. Now, he is highly regarded by those around him, including his students, as being more polite than an average Japanese person.

The dohyo, the sumo wrestling ring, is a sacred place regardless of whether it is used for matches or practice. Of course Gantukus is strict with his technical guidance. Whenever he notices even a slight lack of respect in a student’s words or behavior during training, he mercilessly scolds the boy. This summer, the sumo club of Tottori Johoku High School is focused on winning the Inter High School Sports Festival for the second consecutive year. Gantukus’ teaching will become even more renowned.

His mother, who had been opposed to him leaving Mongolia, is now his biggest supporter. “When I think about my mother, sometimes I feel like returning to Mongolia, but I will stay in Japan. I think it is my mission to train future yokozuna,” says Gantukus. “My five-year-old son has also taken up sumo wrestling. Making him into a strong wrestler has been added to my list of dreams.”

Gan Sensei loves Japanese sumo wrestling more than anyone else. Perhaps he is trying to strengthen the sport itself.
Newborn infants often develop jaundice. This type of jaundice is called neonatal jaundice, and in many cases, the symptoms disappear naturally within about two weeks as the liver of the newborn infant develops. In rare cases, however, the elevated level of bilirubin in the blood, which is the cause of jaundice, remains too high and does not decrease. In mild cases, newborn infants recover with simple treatment, but in developing countries, some symptoms may not be detected and may become severe.

APEL Co. (APEL), a Japan-based medical device and analytical instrument manufacturer with only fourteen employees, is currently working to solve this issue by disseminating the use of simple testing equipment.

These days, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (MOFA) is working jointly with the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) on matching the development issues in developing countries with the knowledge and technology of Japanese Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). APEL’s project “Improvement of Neonatal Healthcare through Introducing Inspecting Equipment for Neonatal Jaundice” was adopted as a “Project Formulation Survey” under the Governmental Commission on the Projects for ODA Overseas Economic Cooperation by MOFA for FY2013.

APEL researched a Provincial Hospital and several District Hospitals in Hoa Binh (Province) in Vietnam. Large, expensive biochemical testing equipment capable of testing of more than ten items was introduced as a result of the support of developed countries. However, because some of the District Hospitals, where people in Vietnam usually see a doctor, are not provided with the equipment and specialists in newborn infants do not work in such hospitals, patients are referred to a higher-level Provincial Hospital. The Provincial Hospital was crowded with patients waiting for their turn for testing. In addition to the large number of patients, it takes money and time to undertake testing with biochemical testing equipment because a test reagent needs to be added to the blood specimen. A bigger problem is that advanced skills are required for blood specimen collection, as injection needles must be inserted into the veins of newborn infants. In addition, the amount of blood necessary for testing is a physical burden for newborn babies. “The testing equipment required on the medical front in developing countries is not necessarily high-performance equipment. The quality of products made by major Japanese manufacturers has won the trust of people around the world. For SMEs like ours, maintaining the quality ‘expected of products made in Japan’ in our inexpensive product with limited functions is an
opportunity to show our company’s technology,” says APEL President Mitsuru Kashiwada.

APEL’s core technology is optics technology. The bilirubin meter with this technology is characterized by the fact that first, it does not need a reagent and second, no injection needles need to be inserted into the veins of newborn infants. A tiny scratch can be pricked on the sole of the foot of a newborn infant with a needle, and the blood from the scratch can be sucked into a very fine glass tube. The blood specimen is then centrifuged for about five minutes and fed into the meter. The value is measured immediately. Because APEL have limited the function of their testing equipment to the measurement of bilirubin, they can manufacture the equipment at a low cost and make it into a small, lightweight device. Even when combined with a centrifugal separator, the equipment can be installed in an outpatient clinic. No difficult operation is necessary when the testing equipment is used, and the bilirubin level can be measured immediately.

In 2014, JICA also adopted APEL’s project “Verification Survey with the Private Sector for Disseminating Japanese Technologies for Promoting Prompt Diagnosis and Treatment of Neonatal Jaundice in Vietnam” as part of its Support for Japanese SMEs Overseas Business Development. APEL introduced its bilirubin meter into eleven County Hospitals in Vietnam on a trial basis, demonstrating the accuracy of the test. The company provided training courses on jaundice in newborn infants and on the method for using the meter at the same time as introduction on a trial basis, receiving a high evaluation from the healthcare bureau of the province and the healthcare providers on the medical front. The project is currently in the phase of dissemination/demonstration, and training to raise awareness of jaundice in newborn infants is provided to each household.

In Vietnam, it has become common for pregnant women to give birth in hospital, but because they are usually discharged from hospital the day after delivery and return home, the symptoms of jaundice in newborn infants are often not noted.

“In addition to our own meter, we ask other small medical device companies like ours in Japan to provide light therapy equipment for jaundice in newborn infants. We are now making efforts to establish a system from diagnosis to treatment in the outpatient clinics of District Hospitals. This is the first time that our company has worked through this type of cooperation, and it is a valuable experience for us,” says Kashiwada.

The challenge that the company is now facing is to have the testing with their bilirubin meter covered by insurance in Vietnam. When this coverage is approved, commercialization will finally begin.

“The provision of technology and a product began as a project under MOFA and JICA. We now meet healthcare providers in the local area of Vietnam directly and can receive valuable comments and feedback. I think that there is a special contribution that only small to medium-sized companies can make. We hope that we will continue to manufacture products that can help patients and the doctors at their side,” says Kashiwada.

A small company motivated by its power to improve neonatal medical care is making significant strides on the international stage.
Much Ado about Udon

Sanuki udon, that is.

Noodles play a major role in Japanese food culture. One popular variety of noodles is udon, in which flour is kneaded into dough and then stretched out and cut into long, thin strands. Since long ago, udon has been a familiar and popular food for the common people of all regions of Japan, and the way udon is made and eaten varies characteristically between each region. The most well-known and popular of them all is “Sanuki udon,” which bears the old provincial name for Kagawa Prefecture.

Kagawa Prefecture covers the north-eastern corner of the island of Shikoku, facing onto the Seto Inland Sea. It has a warm climate but receives little rainfall, and its rice-growing efforts have often met with crop damage due to droughts. For that reason, the people of Kagawa grew wheat crops as an alternative to rice. Since dry climatic conditions are actually more suitable for growing wheat, the people of Kagawa were able to obtain good-quality wheat. The ingredients for udon are very simple, consisting only of wheat flour, salt and water, so the quality of the raw ingredients is key. Blessed by the calm inland sea and sunny weather, Kagawa has also been a salt-producing region since ancient times, with extensive salt fields.

Sanuki udon is made using a bizarre method in which the dough, which is kneaded from wheat flour with the addition of salt and water, is then kneaded further using the feet. Masaaki Kagawa, third-generation president of Sanuki Mengyo Co. — originally an udon shop founded by his grandfather, who was one of the master udon makers in his village — revealed the secret of udon production. “Putting your body weight into it and treading rhythmically is what gives the dough that powerful elasticity that is so unique to Sanuki udon,” he says.

The finished dough is then stretched out to an even thickness using a rolling pin and cut out using a knife, producing noodles with angular corners on their cut edges. The noodles are then thrown into a large cooking pot called a kama, which is filled with boiling hot water. Once the noodles begin to float, as if dancing around in the hot water, then the beautiful, semi-transparent Sanuki udon is ready to eat.

The essential accompaniment when eating these boiled noodles is dashi, the special broth that udon is served with. “The dashi served with Sanuki udon also has unique characteristics. While many types of dashi used in Japanese cooking are made using dried fish shavings like katsuobushi (dried, fermented skipjack tuna shavings), the basic ingredient in the dashi used for Sanuki udon is iriko,” says President Kagawa. Iriko is a word used to refer to dried Japanese anchovies,
which are another local specialty of Kagawa and other coastal regions along the Seto Inland Sea.

Sanuki udon has a long history. It is said that it originated in the year 806, when the Sanuki-born Buddhist high priest Kukai brought the method for making it back with him from his studies in China. A folding screen painting created around 300 years ago, which portrays the scene of a religious festival at Kotohira Shrine, depicts udon shops along the road leading to the shrine, and it can be seen from the picture that the noodles were being made using methods that remain completely unchanged to this day.

Teruo Suwa, chairman of the Sanuki Udon Research Association, explains:

“In the past, udon was a special food that people would eat at annual events such as agricultural events, festivals, new year, hange or hangesho (the eleventh day after the summer solstice) and bon (an annual Buddhist event where Japanese people honor the spirits of their ancestors); as well as at temple ceremonies and celebrations, and at places where people gathered to dine together after collaborative work efforts. There would always have been a master udon maker in every village. Even today, in Kagawa, discussions become heated whenever the subject of udon is brought up. The udon masters of the past must surely have worked to refine the delicious taste and texture of their udon by exchanging information with each other on how to make it.”

There are various different ways of eating Sanuki udon. It can be eaten hot or cold, dipped in tsuyu (a soy-sauce-based dipping sauce) or with dashi poured over it. In recent times, udon shops leave the choice of preferred style of eating up to the customer, and so around half of all udon shops in Kagawa Prefecture are now self-service. Customers receive only the boiled noodles, and then proceed to finish the dish off in their own preferred style; freely adding various toppings that are provided in the shop such as tempura, green onions, ginger and egg, and finally choosing sauces, such as soy sauce or dashi.

“These days, many Kagawa residents have come to eat udon at shops. Our group holds udon-making workshops aimed at children, so that we may continue passing on the traditions of udon to future generations. Our workshops are always very well received,” says Suwa.

“We say that the distinguishing characteristics of Sanuki udon are its hada (smooth skin-like texture), tsuya (shine) and koshi (chewy elasticity),” says Michihiro Arai, chief of the Kagawa Prefectural Government’s Local Products Promotion Division. “It feels smooth on the tongue and as it goes down the throat, and has a strong, chewy texture when bitten. The people of Kagawa love their udon so much that Kagawa has given itself the name ‘Udon-ken,’ meaning ‘Udon Prefecture.’ There are approximately 600 udon shops in the prefecture, and in recent times the number of people visiting Kagawa – not only from other parts of Japan, but also from overseas – to eat Sanuki udon is increasing.”

Meanwhile Kagawa Prefectural Agricultural Experiment Station, in cooperation with Kagawa’s udon industry, has been working to improve wheat varieties that are suited for use in the manufacture of Sanuki udon, and has succeeded in creating its own wheat brand named “Sanuki no Yume,” or “Sanuki Dream.” And in 2016, a course entitled Udon Studies was opened at Kagawa University’s Faculty of Agriculture, enabling students to study and acquire a wide range of udon-related knowledge.

The history of Sanuki udon is said to date back over 1,000 years. Today, with traditional know-how and the added help of scientific corroboration, Sanuki udon continues to evolve, in the search for even greater deliciousness.
JUST one hour and forty minutes from Tokyo and yet a world away, Akan National Park in Hokkaido, the northernmost of Japan’s four main islands, packs a primeval punch no traveler will ever forget.

The journey begins gently enough. Five minutes’ drive out of Memanbetsu Airport finds you in farming country. Deep, wide fields either side of the road are cultivated with wheat, potatoes, spinach and melons. Only the odd tractor slows your progress on Hokkaido’s long, straight roads. In the summer, that is. In the winter, when Hokkaido is blanketed in snow, driving is more of a challenge. Overhead reflective arrows mark the shoulders of the road to keep drivers from sliding over the edge.

The views become more elevated, rugged and coniferous as one approaches the calderas of Lake Kussharo and Lake Mashu. Observatories situated around Lake Mashu are the visitor’s first platform for deep contemplation. Untouched for millennia by anything but the wind, the cobalt blue water of still Lake Mashu is as natural, and yet other worldly, as anything can possibly be.

Kaminokoike, a much smaller but equally magical lake, can be found up a long bumpy path nearby. The clear aquamarine spring water of this lake is crisscrossed on its floor by trees which fell
preserves and promotes its culture through the Kotan’s (meaning “Village” in the Ainu language) craft shops, restaurants, museums and a most excellent theater. The 30-minute show of music and dance here is spellbinding. “Futtarechui,” a festival dance in which the female dancers repeatedly and quite violently throw back their long hair is stunning, while the duet by two women players of the mukkuri mouth harp, an Ainu instrument played by vibrating the long bamboo reed in the mouth with a string or by plucking it with the finger, is almost hypnotizing.

The nearby Eco Museum Center provides visitors an opportunity to find out more about Akan’s natural habitat, the star attraction here being living samples of the lake’s famed marimo balls of green algae. Designated a special national monument, the almost perfectly spherical marimo of Lake Akan are formed by the gentle action of the crystal-clear lake’s currents over a long period of time.

Back on the surface, a speedboat tour into the dark, lush corners of this prehistoric lake is a must for anyone making the quick trip from the city to Akan National Park.

At 900 Prairie, so named for the 900-plus hectares of this enormous cow ranch, a 360° panoramic view of Hokkaido’s characteristic grasslands can be enjoyed — along with an ice cream and a round of “park golf” if you are so inclined.

Along the way, Mt. Io belches out thick plumes of sulfurous steam, reminding the visitor that the hills are alive. A nature trail around the mountain is surrounded by wild rosemary, whose pretty white flowers are in bloom in June and July. From October to March, Mt. Io is a popular destination for stargazers.

Mt. Io is presently closed to climbers owing to the danger of falling rocks, but the nearby mountains of Mt. Oakan (1,370 m) and Mt. Meakan (1,499 m), two of the “100 Famous Japanese Mountains,” as well as Mt. Mokoto (1,000 m) and Mt. Nishibetsu (800 m), all have picturesque trails to their summits that are suitable for walkers of all levels.

Many a weary traveler chooses to take advantage of the hot springs near Mt. Io and stay the night in the delightfully down-to-earth onsen resort of Kawayu. A hot bath in the woods awakens something ancient in the soul.

Refreshed, the very early riser could do worse than head for the hills to look down on Lake Kussharo and take in the famous sunrise glow and white “sea of clouds” that follows it.

Deeper into the National Park at Ainu Kotan near Lake Akan, Hokkaido’s indigenous Ainu community perhaps thousands of years ago. The water temperature remains at a constant 8°C, so the trees will never rot. The sense of prehistory that emanates at this little lake in the woods is accentuated by the loud chorus of cicadas of numerous species wheezing and croaking invisibly in the trees.
In this haiku by the poet and lay Buddhist priest Issa Kobayashi (1763–1828), the 56-year-old writer contemplates a nap as he rests by a pond in soporific midsummer heat, one bare foot cooling on giant lotus leaves.

In Issa’s Pure Land Buddhist tradition, the lotus symbolizes rebirth and enlightenment. Pure Land Buddhism also teaches that the world has declined spiritually, and that people lack spiritual strength. With this knowledge, the reader may detect a deeper meaning in this gently humorous haiku.

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one foot propped  
on the lotus leaves ...  
siesta
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Haiku by Issa Kobayashi (1819); translated by Dr. David Lanoue, Xavier University of Louisiana