



aeru's shop in Meguro, opened in July 2014

REVITALIZING JAPAN'S TRADITIONAL HANDICRAFTS

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HANDCRAFTED items such as ceramics, textiles, wood products, Japanese paper and lacquerware, refined through Japan's culture and history, are prized as national treasures. But traditional handicrafts are now in decline, due to an increasingly Westernized lifestyle and the prices of goods being forced down by mass production and consumerism. Artisans strive to preserve the wisdom and techniques received from their predecessors, but they are faced with several problems, in particular a lack of successors.

"Traditional handicrafts will soon disappear in every region," Rika Yajima observed while still a

young Keio University student, sensing an imminent crisis. Aspiring to be a journalist, Yajima set up her own project at the age of nineteen, roaming across Japan over a span of three years, visiting and interviewing local young artisans, and then publishing a series of articles in a travel magazine.

"Even though Japan has many wonderfully skilled artisans, I felt that young people were not attracted to traditional handicrafts at all because traditional products are made for adults," she says. "Young people nowadays have little or no chance to encounter and learn about them in their childhood."

When she became a senior at Keio, Yajima established aeru, a company that provides opportunities for children to get to know and learn



Yajima talks with a master indigo dyer in Tokushima Prefecture

about traditional handicrafts. (“aeru” means to blend various components together while bringing out the best qualities in each.) Her startup capital was the 1.5 million yen in prize money she received as the winner of the 2010 Entrepreneur Grand Prix, sponsored by the Tokyo Metropolitan Office and the Tokyo Metropolitan Small and Medium Enterprise Support Center. Yajima has a track record of similar triumphs in several other business contests.

“Blending good old traditions with our contemporary sensibilities will give birth to a culture that we can pass on to the next generation,” she explains. “I especially want children to grow up together with Japan’s authentic culture and sensibilities through its traditional handicrafts. Some of them will surely consider becoming artisans themselves.”

Together with artisans from all over Japan, aeru is creating daily living products for babies, such as a set of swaddling clothes, towels and socks made of organic cotton and dyed with lye-fermented indigo from Tokushima Prefecture that uses no synthetic chemicals. Other products include the “unspillable tableware” series for children, featuring Yamanaka lacquerware from Ishikawa Prefecture, Otani-yaki ceramics from Tokushima Prefecture, and Tobe-yaki pottery from Ehime Prefecture.

Now twenty-six, Yajima has a unique management style. Applying the analogy that running a company is like bringing up a child, she calls her company “aeru-kun,” (“kun” being an affectionate way of addressing a young boy in Japanese). She makes decisions based on creating the optimal environment for aeru-kun’s healthy and happy growth.

Yajima herself is as open-hearted as a child. “It’s important to be true to yourself, and do things you think are ethical,” she says. “If it happens to be something society needs, you will naturally continue doing it.” Yajima is already eyeing the next step: She is currently exhibiting aeru’s products in Paris at the famous department store Le Bon Marche Rive Gauche as well as in Hong Kong.

“Our ancestors’ knowledge is a continual process of accumulation. Once that process stops, you can’t make up for it with money,” Yajima observes. “This is especially true in traditional handicrafts. When the artisans disappear, there will be no more traditional products, no matter how much money you have.”

Yajima and aeru create bonds among the people who encounter it, and are helping to weave traditional handicrafts into the fabric of the future. Yajima hopes this will build the perfect environment in which Japan’s time-honored skills can be handed on to the next generation. **V**



Wooden bowls designed to be easy for children to use