

# HIGHLIGHTING *Japan*

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WASHI: STRENGTH, BEAUTY &  
ENDLESS POTENTIAL

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THEME FOR MARCH:

## WASHI: STRENGTH, BEAUTY & ENDLESS POTENTIAL

The oldest examples of Japanese handmade paper, or *washi*, were made in 702 and are preserved in the Shosoin repository in Nara Prefecture. Being made from natural fibers and chemical free, *washi* is not only strong and long lasting, but also flexible, intrinsically beautiful, even translucent. For these reasons and more, *washi* paper continues to find use in an ever-expanding range of products and applications.

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Okinawa by Monorail

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**MANAGING EDITOR** Sawaji Osamu

**EDITORS** Alex Hendy, Chiba Hitoshi, Fujita Mao

**EDITORIAL SUPPORT** Kiura Eriko

**CONTRIBUTORS** Kato Kyoko, Sasaki Takashi, Sato Kumiko, Sugiyama Mamoru

**DESIGN** Imai Mei, Okadome Hirofumi

**PHOTOS** Aizawa Tadashi, Itabashi Yuichi, Sugiyama Mamoru, Tanaka Satoshi

**VIDEOGRAPHY** Tanaka Satoshi

## ON THE COVER

*Washi: Strength, Beauty & Endless Potential*

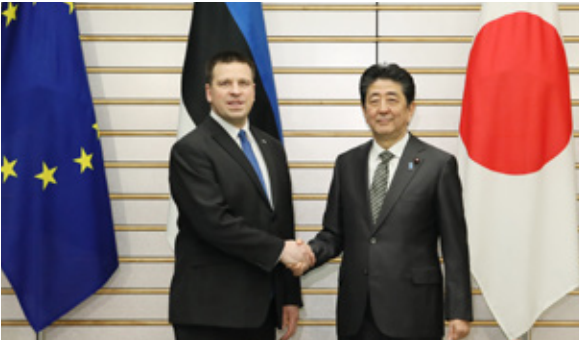
Photo: Courtesy of Iida Mizuhiki Association

## EDITORS' NOTE

Japanese names in this publication are written in Japanese order: family name first, personal name last.



# JAPAN-ESTONIA SUMMIT MEETING



Photograph of the leaders shaking hands

On February 10, 2020, Mr. Abe Shinzo, Prime Minister of Japan, held a summit meeting with H.E. Mr. Jüri Ratas, Prime Minister of the Republic of Estonia, who was paying an official working visit to Japan.

As opening remarks, Prime Minister Abe welcomed Prime Minister Ratas to Japan, stating: “I would like to once again express my gratitude for the warm hospitality extended to me when I visited Estonia in January two years ago. Estonia, an important partner for Japan that shares fundamental values, has been a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) since this year. I would like to openly exchange our views on strengthening our bilateral relations, as well as on challenges in regional and international communities.” In response, Prime Minister Ratas stated, “January 12, 2018 was a memorable day as it marked the beginning of the 100th anniversary of Estonia’s independence as well as being the day when the Prime Minister of Japan visited Estonia for the first time; a business delegation of nearly 20 companies has accompanied me on this visit; Estonia hopes to pursue further cooperation with Japan.”

Regarding bilateral relations, Prime Minister Abe stated, “In the economic area, we have witnessed remarkable enhancement of Japan-Estonia relations, including more business missions and stepped-up activities by JETRO and JBIC; this is particularly evident in corporate cooperation between the two countries in the area of ICT, of which Estonia is at the cutting edge in the world, and Japan continues to expect the further strengthening of bilateral economic relations.”

Prime Minister Abe also stated, “In the area of cybersecurity, Japan participated in NATO’s cyber defence exercise Cyber Coalition that was held in Estonia in December

last year and has dispatched Ministry of Defense personnel to the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence located in Estonia, in addition to the regular exchanges of information and consultations between our authorities; it is expected that such initiatives will further enhance cybersecurity.”

In response, Prime Minister Ratas stated, “ICT and cyber are areas where Estonia and Japan can promote meaningful cooperation, and I believe we can share a variety of experiences with each other; the Estonian company that will sign a memorandum today is a company that developed the information sharing system in Estonia.”

The two leaders welcomed the working holiday programme that will be commenced March between the two countries. The two leaders expressed hope that the programme will prompt young people in the two countries to become familiar with each other’s country and encourage people-to-people exchanges between the two countries.

Prime Minister Abe stated, “Japan will strengthen its cooperation in the international arena with Estonia as a non-permanent member of the UNSC.”

Prime Minister Ratas responded, “We appreciate Japan’s support for Estonia’s bid for a non-permanent seat at the UNSC; Estonia attaches importance to the reform of the UNSC and strongly supports Japan’s bid for a permanent seat at the UNSC.”

The two leaders held a wide-ranging discussions on the situations in East Asia and Europe, and confirmed that they will work together to address them. Regarding the situation in North Korea, the two leaders shared the view on continuing to cooperate closely toward the complete denuclearization of North Korea. Prime Minister Abe sought Prime Minister Ratas’ understanding and cooperation for the early resolution of the abductions issue and obtained his support.



Photograph of the Japan-Estonia Summit Meeting

Photographs and text courtesy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan and the Cabinet Public Relations Office of the Government of Japan



# WASHI: STRENGTH, BEAUTY & ENDLESS POTENTIAL

Processed by hand from locally harvested gampi, mitsumata and/or paper mulberry wood fibers, *washi* is traditional Japanese paper that has more than withstood the test of time. *Wa* (Japanese) *shi* (paper) is not only stronger than conventional modern paper made from wood pulp, it is also intrinsically beautiful and, being supple, can be applied to a wide variety of applications both practical and artistic. In this month's issue of *Highlighting Japan*, we take a look at a few examples, old and new, which showcase washi's strength and beauty, and hint at its endless potential. We also show how Japan's culture of paper extends beyond washi to include such things as the paper-cutting art of *kamikiri*, novelty teabags, and recyclable beds fit for the world's top athletes.

# Washi

## TRADITION AND NEW POSSIBILITIES

**P**RODUCED in Echizen City, Fukui Prefecture, a major producer of *washi*, or traditional Japanese paper, Echizen Washi enjoys a long, 1,500-year history. We interviewed Sugihara Yoshinao, the president of Sugihara Washipaper, Inc., which began as an Echizen Washi wholesaler in 1871, about the history, features and future possibilities of washi.

### **How did washi begin?**

It is said that paper made from hemp was introduced to Japan from China around the seventh century. To make paper from hemp, people flaked fibers off of hemp by cutting or mashing it. But the fibers were so long and strong that it took a lot of time and effort to make paper. That is why people came to use plants native to Japan, such as *kozo* and *gampi*. If these plants are boiled with the ash with which the plants were burned, their fibers can be flaked easily. In the Nara period (710-794), Japanese people needed so much paper for Buddhist sutras and tax records that the government spread paper-making techniques nationwide. Soon paper was made in many parts of the country, such as Echizen, Mino (Gifu Prefecture) and Sekishu (Shimane Prefecture), and excellent paper came to be accepted for the payment of taxes. In the Heian period (794-1185), people also established a technique called *nagashisuki*, for making high-quality paper. Since then, washi has been used for a wide range of purposes, including official documents, art and daily commodities.

### **What are the characteristics of washi?**

Because washi is made from intricately

intertwined fibers 5 to 10 millimeters long, it is very strong. In addition, because it is almost free from chemicals, it is not susceptible to chemical changes and can last for a long time. Japan's oldest paper, made in 702, is kept inside the Shosoin in Nara Prefecture, which houses treasures of the Nara and Heian periods.

Features unique to washi also make it ideal for *shoji*, fittings such as windows, sliding doors and partitions. When the sunlight filters through *shoji* made of washi, the whole room is filled with soft light. This is because the intricately intertwined washi fibers disperse light. Furthermore, because the air between the washi fibers absorbs humidity or retains heat, the *shoji* can also have insulating and humidity-adjusting effects.

### **In what fields have you seen an increase in the demand for washi in recent years?**

One is architecture. Washi has been used more widely as a material in the interiors of hotels, restaurants and offices. Washi with its beautiful, natural texture is rated highly abroad as well and our washi is used in many places, such as the show windows of a perfume maker in Paris, sushi bars and law offices in New York and restaurants in Canberra, the capital of Australia.

Washi attracts a lot of domestic and international attention in the art arena as well. Washi has been used for artwork, including calligraphy and *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints, since ancient times. But in recent years, we have received an increasing number of orders for washi for particular works from artists in a wide range of fields, such as calligraphy and modern art, because the artists are fascinated with washi's






Sugihara Yoshinao, the president of Sugihara Washipaper, Inc., with samples of Echizen Washi paper products

durability and its natural texture. One of those artists is Richard Serra, an American sculptor internationally renowned for his work with huge metal plates. He has used washi for woodblock works for about fifteen years and we send him washi almost every month.

#### **What future possibilities do you think washi has?**

*Kozo*, a raw material for washi, can be harvested every year and *mitsumata* every three years. New shoots soon sprout from freshly reaped stock. In addition, compared with general paper, just a small quantity of water and chemicals is used to make washi. Washi can also last for a long time. As this shows, washi is environmentally friendly. That is why I believe that we can contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by

popularizing washi.

In addition, with more and more people fascinated with and purchasing materials for handwritten letters, a long-established stationery store in Tokyo has been increasing its stock of rolled letter paper in recent years. As society is becoming more and more digital, more and more people are reconsidering the analog ways of doing things. Considering this trend, in addition to products for building interiors, we aim to further increase the use of washi products that can be used easily as communication tools by ordinary people, such as postcards, letter paper and business cards, both inside and outside the country. 

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Interview by SAWAJI OSAMU

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# Sekishu-banshi

## Supporting Culture and Art



Nishida Seigi pulls the fibers in solution onto a mat, forming a sheet

***Sekishu-banshi*, a famous *washi* paper from Shimane Prefecture with more than 1,300 years of history, supports culture and art both within Japan and abroad.**

**SUGIYAMA MAMORU**

**S**EKISHU-BANSHI has continued to be produced for more than 1,300 years in the Iwami region centered around Hamada City, Shimane Prefecture, and it was registered on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2009. Later, it was registered again in 2014 as “*Washi*, craftsmanship of traditional Japanese hand-made paper,” together with *honminoshi* (Gifu Prefecture) and *hosokawashi* (Saitama Prefecture).

Sekishu-banshi is made through a traditional technique that adds a viscous liquid taken from aibika root to the delicate, long fibers of locally-grown *kozo* paper mulberry trees. The paper’s characteristics come from the fact that the endocarp, a part of the tree between the bark and the tree core,

All photos: Sugiyama Mamoru

is used, while this is removed in the *washi* paper production of other regions. Because of this, the finished *washi* has a unique luster, a texture with a faint green tint, and is quite strong. This is why it spread across Japan during the Edo period (1603-1867) as a practical kind of paper, used for such things as writing paper for calligraphy, account books for shops, umbrellas and toys.

However, though there were over 6,000



An Iwamikagura mask made of *Sekishu-banshi*



The bark of *kozo* paper mulberry is pulled from the branches then steamed, beaten and wind dried. (1) A layer of fiber beneath the bark is then stripped away. (2) The stripped fibers after boiling, steaming and beating. (3) Sheets of *washi* are dried outdoors



producers, their numbers were reduced due to the spread of machine-made washi and a decrease in demand during the Meiji period (1868-1912), with only four producers left today in the Misumi area of Hamada City. Nishida Seigi is the seventh generation of washi producers at Sekisyu-Washi and also head of the Sekishu-banshi Craftsmen's Association, which is made up of the remaining four producers. He says, "All four producers are blessed with having successors, so it looks like we can continue on with the next generation."

In recent years, the number of farmers and specialty merchants cultivating *kozo* trees has decreased, and each washi producer must now handle all processes, from cultivating the materials, to harvesting, processing and sales. "The conventional division of labor that has supported the manufacturing of washi is changing. However, sekishu-banshi is widely used in the masks and costumes of actors and on the stage for *Iwamikagura*, which has been passed down since ancient times in this region. Even today, there are over 100 groups that perform *Iwamikagura*, and we are supported by this demand. It is an ideal form of local production for local consumption for traditional art and traditional craftsmanship."

Additionally, more than 60% of the products made by Nishida are used in repairing cultural assets. Damaged parts of paintings and books are strengthened by attaching washi and through other processes. Sekishu-banshi is used to repair historical fixtures and cultural assets such as at the Shosoin treasure house in Nara, Hongan-ji temples in Kyoto, and Nagoya Castle. Recently, washi has come to be used

in the repair of Western artwork and important documents, with many orders coming from art museums around the world with Japanese art collections, including the British Museum and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Wishing to actively respond to this global demand, Nishida participates in paper trade shows both at home and abroad with others from the Craftsmen's Association. Additionally, he works to popularize sekishu-banshi using the Sekishu Washi Kaikan, built locally in 2008, as a base. Sekishu-banshi producers began an international exchange program in the 1970s, accepting researchers from the Kingdom of Bhutan and elsewhere, working together to improve manufacturing techniques for handmade paper overseas. Members of the Craftsmen's Association take turns working as instructors for washi-making workshops held at the Sekishu Washi Kaikan for locals and tourists.

In addition to these activities, Nishida also collaborates with a variety of artists, creating a wide range of products, including single-flower vases, coasters, cushions and lights.

Nishida, who is rediscovering the charm and potential of sekishu-banshi, says, "Sekishu-banshi still exists precisely because our predecessors used locally-produced materials and continued the traditional manufacturing methods. I am taking on new challenges, such as developing unique products, while also holding on to the basics. When collaborating with other artists, I discover unexpected expressions through washi, and I am surprised quite often." ■

# Showing Thoughtfulness with Paper Cords

The tradition of making *mizuhiki*, decorative paper cords fashioned from *washi* paper, has been passed down from generation to generation in Iida City, Nagano Prefecture, since the Edo period (1603-1867).

SASAKI TAKASHI

**M**IZUHIKI are decorative paper cords that are typically attached to such things as envelopes containing gifts of money on ceremonial occasions, meaningful presents, and the protective amulets offered by temples and shrines.

Mizuhiki are beautifully made by twisting small pieces of *washi* paper, hardening them with a glue paste, then coloring them with a dye or by wrapping them in thin silver or gold paper. The manner in which mizuhiki are tied and what number and colors are used varies according to the occasion, such as whether it is celebratory or commemorative. Recently, in addition to the ceremonial kinds of uses described above, mizuhiki are being used for such things as interior decorations and hair accessories.

Iida City in Nagano Prefecture accounts for about 70% of the domestic production of mizuhiki paper cords.

According to Iwahara Katsunori, chief director of the Iida Mizuhiki Association, “The use of mizuhiki in Japan is said to

date back more than 1,400 years, to when Japanese envoys to the Sui Dynasty of China returned from the Chinese continent in the company of Sui envoys bearing gifts for the Japanese Emperor. The gifts had red and white hemp strings attached to them along with prayers for a safe return voyage. Since then, people have tied gifts for the Imperial Court with red and white cords, a custom which is the root of present-day mizuhiki.”

Iida City, located in southern Nagano Prefecture and sandwiched between the South and Central Alps, is blessed with an abundance of plants, such as *kozo* and *mitsumata*, that make up the raw materials of *washi*, and the crystal-clear water essential to paper-making. The *washi* that has long been made in this region is popular for its strength and resistance to water. Around the Kambun era (1661-1673) of the Edo period, people in Iida began to use *washi* to make *motoyui*, the band used to tie the base of a topknot, a traditional Japanese hairstyle, and this became a local specialty. Later, during the



Cranes (above) and turtles (below) are common motifs in *mizuhiki* designs



All photos: Courtesy of Iida Mizuhiki Association



Prize winners in a *mizuhiki*-making contest (above and below)

Genroku era (1688-1704), a man named Sakurai Bunshichi produced a strong type of motoyui having a beautiful white gloss. This product, called Bunshichi Motoyui, went on sale at a store in Edo (now Tokyo) and became very popular.


Iwahara says, “Thanks to Bunshichi, Iida Motoyui became known nationwide. After the Meiji Restoration in 1868, however, topknots faded from popularity after the new government relaxed the old rules on hairstyles, which led to a sharp drop in the demand for motoyui. It was then that the people of Iida began to make mizuhiki for decorating commemorative envelopes, applying motoyui techniques in response to the situation. Soon mizuhiki came to be used for a wide variety of products, such as betrothal gifts and New Year’s decorations, and the craft grew to become a significant local industry in Iida.”

According to Iwahara, it was mainly local farmers that supported the development of Iida Mizuhiki. The manufacturing of mizuhiki involves not just making the colorful paper cords, but also the secondary process of tying them according to their purpose. At the height of production, some 5,000 to 6,000 people worked to do this by hand during the

slow season on their farms.

In recent years, however, local people have been worried about the survival of traditional techniques due to the surge in labor costs and shortages of labor. To resolve these problems, the Iida Mizuhiki Association has been making a range of efforts, such as developing new items, including earrings and corsages, and holding classes at elementary schools enabling students to experience mizuhiki-making. A mizuhiki contest has also been held every year since 2014. The contest is divided into accessory categories, such as bracelets and hairpins, luxurious-looking gifts, such as wine bottles and candies, and other arts. Ingenious works that broaden the possibilities of mizuhiki are brought to the contest from both inside and outside the country.

Iwahara says, “Mizuhiki knots connect people and their hearts and represent affection and consideration for others. We would like this mizuhiki culture to be disseminated to foreign countries as well.”

Iwahara adds that the Association is carrying out plans to share the attractions of mizuhiki both domestically and internationally by promoting an easy mizuhiki-making kit and implementing mizuhiki skill tests. 







## Expanding the Potential of Design with Paper

Highly artistic paper-made products from Tachikawa, Tokyo, are winning admirers in Japan and abroad.

### SATO KUMIKO

GENTLY lifting the edge of the round piece of paper, with its numerous cuts in concentric circles, reveals a paper vessel. It's full of air, light enough to give a sense of weightlessness, and the shape is easily changed into a plate or a flower vase depending on how the paper is spread out, yet it firmly keeps its shape.

Called *airvase*, this strange and beautiful paper vessel is manufactured and sold by Fukunaga Print Co., a company located in Tachikawa City, Tokyo. CEO Yamada Akiyoshi says, "About ten years have passed since we began selling *airvase*, and it has become a long-selling product, with new versions released nearly every year. Collaborating with graphic designers and many other artists, we have continued to create *airvases*, each unique yet made from the same 20 centimeter round shape."



The company's showroom and (right) workshop  
Photos: Courtesy of Shinpei Kato



Designers' Saturday 2018, November 2018 (left); Paper animals in the TOP TO TAIL series (right)  
Photos: Left, Courtesy of Ooki Jingu/Designers' Saturday 2018; right, Courtesy of Ikue Takizawa/TOP TO TAIL

The company, a small enterprise of forty-one employees, systematically handles everything from paper printing to processing. Community-based since its establishment in 1963, the company typically printed postcards and business cards, manufactured folding boxes for local confectionery shops, and so on. However, in 2006, when Yamada took on the role of second CEO, the company started on the Kami No Kousakujo (paper workshop) project to pursue the potential of paper internally. Yamada explains, "We are facing a difficult time as small printing companies in town are gradually being eliminated through the digitalization of printing and the movement towards becoming paperless, but Japan produces many types of paper unknown to the world, and each has beauty as a material. I wanted to show the world the artistic qualities of paper."

Graphic and product designers participate in the Kami No Kousakujo project, suggesting new paper products with unrestricted ideas and forming those ideas into products together with Fukunaga Print Co.'s engineers.

From these ideas, the unique 1/100 Architectural Model Accessories Series was born, producing incidental scenes entirely with paper, using the people, plants and so on used in architectural models. This is a product of architect Terada Naoki. First exhibited in 2009 at Interior Lifestyle, an international trade fair held in Tokyo, the products that were created out of the Kami No Kousakujo project drew a large amount of attention from visitors and increased the number of inquiries from abroad.


*airvase* was designed by Torafu Architects, a group of Tokyo-based architects, in 2010. The idea required great technical ability for the die-cutting processing,

which uses a blade pattern with a fine pitch to precisely cut out shapes, but the Fukunaga Print Co. team of engineers managed to make this work and the product was commercialized.

In 2011, Fukunaga Print Co. and Terada created the new TERADA MOKEI brand, selling products that allow users to enjoy three-dimensional designs by simply cutting or folding paper, such as the 1/100 Architectural Model Accessories Series, the 1/100 Architectural Model Greeting Card, and the 1/100 Architectural Model Accessories Series Coaster.

Currently, thirty-five groups of designers participate in the Kami No Kousakujo project, creating a wide variety of products, such as notebooks, message cards, games and photo albums. Other examples include origami paper and puzzles that use geometrical patterns created by Tokoro Asao, who also designed the emblem for the Olympics and Paralympics to be held in Tokyo in 2020, and a mobile designed by architect and designer Nagaoka Ben that mimics a jellyfish drifting in the sea.

The project makes collaboration with people in a variety of fields and corporations a reality, including fashion designers, engineering designers, photographers, manga artists and fabric dyers. The project is expanding into the realm of creating large objects, such as window displays and stage design, experiential installations that fuse the latest digital art with simple paper.

Yamada says, "I feel that the potential for design is expanding through the activities of the Kami No Kousakujo project, which was started to expand the possibilities of paper. I believe that design is the power to imagine a wonderful future. Though we are in the manufacturing industry, I hope to continue to hold on to this power in the future." 

# Eco-Friendly Bedding Fit for Athletes



For Olympic Games  
©Tokyo2020

**Eco-friendly bedding offering superior sleep comfort will be provided to the Athletes' Village for the Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games.**

## KATO KYOKO

EVERYONE'S body shape is different. In athletes especially, muscle distribution tends to vary depending on the sport they play. Judo athletes weighing a hundred kilos or more, for example, have high muscle volume throughout the body, whereas swimmers have broad shoulder muscles, and some female track and field athletes can weigh at the thirty-kilogram level.

The Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games Official Bedding Partner airweave undertook the development of premium bedding products that are suited to each athlete's individual body shape. The company will provide customizable bedding to the Athletes' Village to ensure that all of the approximately 18,000 Olympic athletes staying there are able to get high-quality sleep.

The bedding developed by airweave has very distinct characteristics. All items, from mattresses to bed frames to duvets, are made of recyclable and hypoallergenic materials and possess superior

functionality.

For example, the bed frame is made of cardboard.

"A member of the bed frame development team came up with the idea of using cardboard to make a bed frame after seeing strawberries packed in cardboard in a supermarket," says airweave president Takaoka Motokuni.

The development team conducted verification testing of bed frames made from cardboard, wood and metal. In one experiment, for example, 150-kilogram and 50-kilogram weights were dropped from a height of 30 centimeters, simulating an athlete jumping up and down on the bed frame. After carrying out various experiments of this kind, it was found that cardboard has higher impact resistance when compared to wood or metal as it can create many beams to enhance its strength. It was also more lightweight, less costly and easier to process.

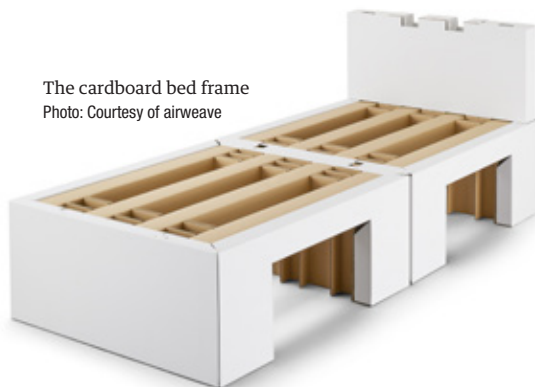
In addition, the 10-centimeter thick mattress, which directly supports sleep, is made from an original resin fiber material called "airfiber®," instead of the more commonly used spring coils and urethane material. The mattress is divided into three components: head and shoulders, lower back and legs. Each



The three-piece modular mattress  
(the sections marked with “100”)  
Photo: Courtesy of airweave



The cardboard bed frame  
Photo: Courtesy of airweave



part has a different firmness level depending on the density of fiber.

“If you sink too far down into the mattress it is difficult for you to roll over. The muscle power (energy of the muscles) needed to roll over requires your brain waves to be activated, interrupting your deep sleep. In other words, in order to improve sleep quality, ideally you need a mattress that allows you to roll over during sleep using less muscle power,” says Takaoka.

However, it is difficult to make bedding that is suited to the individual body types of some 18,000 athletes. Up to now, airweave has provided mattresses to a large number of athletes and collected data on their body types. The company developed a system that uses a cloud database to decide the firmness level when the body shape, weight and sport played are entered into the system, enabling bedding to be customized to the body type of individual athletes.

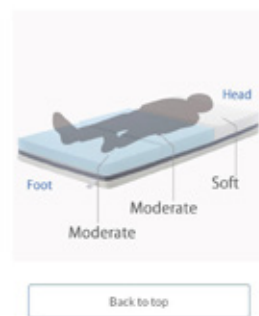
“Athletes can customize the mattress according to their body type by swapping the order of the three blocks in accordance with the patterns recommended, enabling them to get a good night’s sleep by using less muscle power to roll over,” Takaoka says.

Modeling a best-fit mattress arrangement  
Photos: Courtesy of airweave




#### Mattress pattern

Below is the recommend mattress pattern for you.



Out of consideration for animal rights and animal allergy sufferers, duvets are made from synthetic down that has functionality equal to or higher than the real thing. The same considerations apply to pillows, sheets and mattresses.

When the Games are over, airweave will collect all bedding items. The company is looking into the possibility of supplying the bedding items to national and municipal medical and nursing care facilities, and evacuation shelters in times of disaster. Discarded mattresses will be melted into pellets and processed again into bedding or reprocessed into plastic carrier bags or the like.

“Our mission at this Olympic event is to provide athletes with the best sleep quality through our bedding. We want to help every player get a good night’s sleep to enable them to deliver their best performance,” says Takaoka. 

# Any Requests?

## The Art of Cutting Paper

*Kamikiri*, or paper cutting, is a traditional Japanese performance art that involves cutting designs out of a single sheet of paper based on requests from the audience.

SATO KUMIKO



Hayashiya Imamaru  
on stage

JAPAN has a number of small variety theaters called *yose*, mainly found in Tokyo and Osaka. Here, audiences are entertained by performances that are centered around the traditional storytelling art forms of *rakugo* and *kodan* but also include *iromono* variety acts such as juggling, acrobatics and *manzai* stand-up comedy. One such *iromono* is *kamikiri*, or paper cutting, which involves cutting silhouettes of images such as good-luck charms and seasonal events requested by the audience out of a single sheet of paper with scissors.

Hayashiya Imamaru, a *kamikiri* artist with a career spanning some sixty years, says, “The origins of *kamikiri* can be seen in *katashiro* paper effigies of humans or animals used in Shinto purification rites. But it was in the Edo period (1603-1867) that it was established as a performance art. Later, with the advent of Western-style scissors, it evolved into the nimble cutting style we see today.”

All photos: Itabashi Yuichi

*Kamikiri* involves cutting paper while telling the audience an entertaining story, with *ohayashi* musical accompaniment featuring shamisen, drums and cymbals. In a matter of seconds or minutes, artists create images such as seasonal events, landscapes, lucky charms and topical subjects



Cutting out a lion on request

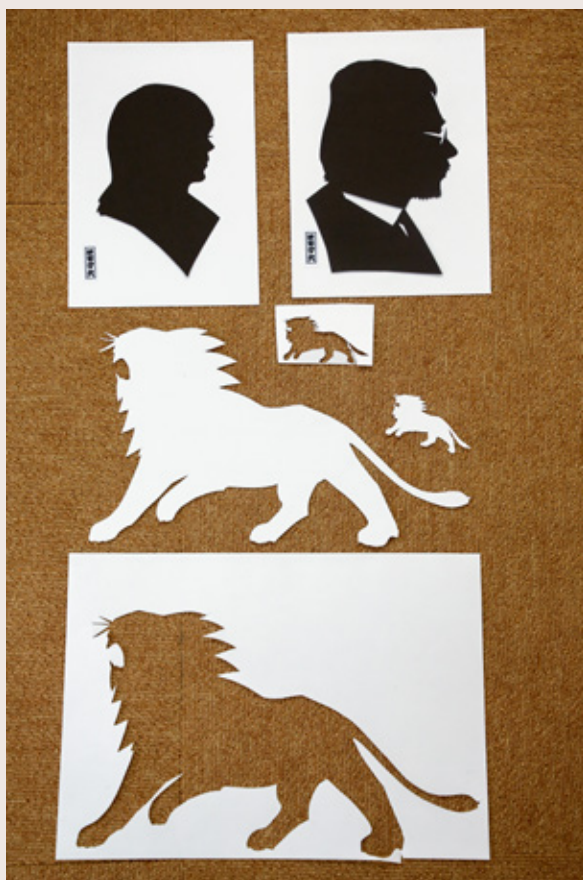
from a plain sheet of white paper without drawing an outline beforehand.

“When I perform, I try to do it in such a way that the paper cutting can be enjoyed even by those sitting toward the back of the yose and so that the images captured are conveyed at a glance. Above all, the appeal of the yose is the conversational interaction between the artist and individual members of the audience,” says Imamaru. Kamikiri artists create improvised cut-outs in response to audience requests. One such cut-out is a portrait of an audience member created on the spot and presented to the person as a gift. Many recipients of these cut-outs also ask for the paper from which the silhouette was cut, which has a beauty of its own.

Imamaru says that he browses the latest news so that he is prepared for any topical request from the audience. As well as being trained in drawing skills, which are the basis of the art form, kamikiri artists need to study classical Japanese dance and *gidayu*, and learn foreign languages (English and French). They also need to train in the use of scissors. Good tools are essential, and Imamaru uses scissors that were specially developed by the first kamikiri master Hayashiya Shoraku in collaboration with a long-established cutting blade business in Nihonbashi-Ningyocho.

Kamikiri is a performance art unique to Japan, and Imamaru is often invited to perform overseas. In 2017, he was sponsored by the Embassy of Japan in Canada to tour Toronto, Ottawa and Montreal, enacting all performances in both English and French. In 2018, he performed in Paris and in 2019 performed once again in Toronto. “I started studying languages as soon as I started training in the art of kamikiri. As I cut out a portrait, I ask about the person’s hometown and hobbies and work their responses into the image as I go. If these conversations were interpreted by an interpreter every time, it would slow me down and the audience would lose interest. Ultimately, the true appeal of kamikiri performance art would be lost,” he says.

Imamaru also holds kamikiri workshops in schools and residential care institutions in Japan and



Paper cut-out lion and face silhouettes

overseas. “We need many years of rigorous training to be able to create paper cut-outs exactly as we envision them, but I have devised teaching materials for elementary school workshops that make it easy for anyone to learn. Children get so engrossed in the fun of cutting paper to create silhouettes of their favorite animals that they forget about taking breaks,” says Imamaru.

After discovering the pleasure of kamikiri, some decided to take it up seriously by becoming apprenticed to Imamaru. Hayashiya Hana and Hayashiya Kinosuke are two examples. Hana became an apprentice of Imamaru and trained under him for more than ten years. Today, she is the first female kamikiri artist to perform at a yose. This traditional performing art that entertains people with paper and scissors is being passed on to the next generation. **17**



Running a kite into flight

# Giant Kites Battle On with Local Energy

**The Shirone Giant Kite Battle in Niigata City, Niigata Prefecture, in which two neighboring communities do battle using giant handmade kites, is still going strong after 300 years.**

**SASAKI TAKASHI**

EVERY year in early June, the people of Minami Ward, Niigata City, hold a stirring festival in which teams living on the west bank of the river do battle with teams living on the east bank using giant kites. The Shirone Giant Kite Battle draws more than 200,000 spectators over the five days of the festival.

The stage for the Kite Battle is the 80-meter-wide Nakanokuchi River, which flows north to south through Minami Ward. Members of the east team from Minami Ward's Shirone district and west team from the Ward's Nishi-Shirone district run with their kites along their opposing riverbanks, pulling the kites into the air with thick ropes called *motozuna*. By design, the giant, height 7 by width 5 meter kites soon become entangled and fall in to the river.

All photos: Courtesy of the Shirone Association for Battle of Giant Kite

After the teams have entangled the *motozuna* and other connecting ropes still further using the force of the river current, a tug of war begins, with the team that snaps the opponent's ropes winning the bout. Multiple bouts are held over the course of the festival. These days a time limit is set for each bout, but on one occasion in the past, when no time limit was set, a battle was only declared a draw at sunset after over 4 hours of intense tug of war.

Abe Ryuichi, secretary-general of the Shirone Association for Battle of Giant Kite, says, "There are various views about the origins of the festival, but it is said that it began when a kite flown by people from the Shirone side of the river crashed in a field on the Nishi-Shirone side, damaging the crops. Angered, the people on the Nishi-Shirone side retaliated by crashing a kite on the Shirone side. Whatever the origin, I think the main reason why the festival has continued is that raising kites into the air makes everyone feel cheerful. In the past, houses and farms were repeatedly damaged by floods in the expansive swampy lowlands of the Niigata Plains. For that reason alone, it seems that this grand festival, held



Painting kites in the elementary school yard



The kites become entangled and fall into the river

once a year along the river, must have been the most enjoyable social event.”

The giant kites used in the battle are made by stretching Japanese *washi* paper over a bridge of vertical and horizontal bamboo spars. The washi paper is essential for making the giant kites, as it is strong and lightweight. Nowadays long, rolled-up sheets of washi paper are used, but in the past the kites were made by combining 324 sheets of small 46 by 32 centimeter pieces of washi paper. Abe says, “Modern paper made from pulp has a fiber orientation, or ‘grid,’ and it can be easily cut when pressure is applied along the fibers. However, with washi paper, the fibers of the *kozo* paper mulberry plant are intertwined in a complex way, lacking a grid. It is the best material for making giant kites that can rise up and harness the power of strong wind, as the paper is hard to tear no matter which direction force is applied.”

Currently, six east teams and seven west teams from each neighborhood association participate in the Shirone Giant Kite Battle, with the 30 to 50 members from each team taking one year to build 25 to 30 giant kites each. According to Abe, the distinguishing feature of the Shirone giant kites is the fact that they are made entirely by hand from natural materials, from the bamboo spars for the kite frame to the 130 meter long, 2.5 centimeter thick *motozuna*, which are each made from 40 kilograms of domestically produced hemp. The vivid illustrations on the kites depicting samurai, butterflies, fish and other motifs, are also hand-drawn. Local people deepen their relationships through this work, which takes more than

6 months to complete.

There are master kite builders in the Shirone district, and in 1980 they created a massive, height 19 by width 14 meter kite which they were able to fly, making it the largest kite in the world at that time according to Guinness World Records.

Abe says, “An issue going forward is the passing on of techniques, as the birthrate is decreasing and the population is aging in the region. Among the 13 east and west teams, some don’t have enough successors or people to help out, so we are very open to participation by people from outside the Shirone district and non-Japanese people, as well. Before a festival, on a weekend in April with good weather, we lay out the giant kites in the elementary school yard and paint them all at once. Many people participate in the creation process in this way, and I hope people enjoy the giant kites of Shirone on this day as well as on the day of the festival.” ㊦



Children having fun next to an easy-to-carry cylindrical kite





The popular otter teabags



# Teabags that Swim in your Cup

**Teabags in the shape of dolphins, cats and other animals are winning popularity as novelty gifts.**

**KATO KYOKO**

**D**OLPHINS and sea turtles swimming in an ocean-like blue herb tea and a Japanese raccoon dog rocking about in roasted green tea. These teabags, based on over fifty varieties of living creatures, have gained popularity as small gifts. Over 170,000 packs have been sold since sales began in 2016, with each teabag costing around 300 to 400 yen.

Daisho-Suisan Co. in Toda City, Saitama Prefecture, the firm behind sales and manufacturing of these unique, original tea bags, has expanded to the trading of marine products, a web business, and more, since its founding in 2014. CEO Takahashi

Shota explains the background to the development of the teabags.

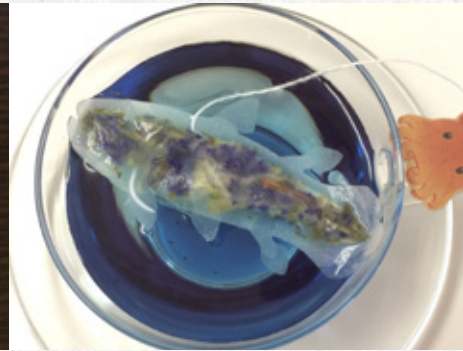
“The dolphin-shaped teabag that we first developed was born out of a request to create an online store for a tea plantation in Amakusa City, Kumamoto Prefecture, famous as an island for dolphin watching. Our client had the idea of creating a teabag in the shape of a dolphin, appropriate for Amakusa, and we believed that many people would be interested if we could make it.”

There were already goldfish-shaped tea bags in Taiwan, and the fact that those teabags were winning popularity confirmed the company’s belief. But Takahashi had no experience in manufacturing teabags. Because of this, the company initially wanted to outsource manufacturing to other manufacturers, but they were rejected by all the companies they consulted with. This was because it was difficult



All photos Courtesy of Daisho-Suisan Co.





Top and below, some of the wide range of novelty teabags

to produce teabags with a unique design in a small lot of several hundred bags, as teabags are generally low-cost items produced in large quantities by a machine.

And so, Takahashi worked on developing the teabag on his own in a trial and error process, from the searching of materials to processing methods. For normal teabags, the “handle” part is a square piece of paper, but Takahashi devoted himself to coming up with colors and designs that matched the shape of the teabag filter holding the tea leaves. For example, for the otter teabags which are said to be very popular lately, the paper upper body of the otter, which becomes the “handle,” attaches to the edge of the cup, and the lower body filter part is submerged in hot water. The design is adorable, appearing as if the otter is hanging from the cup with both of its front arms.


For the filter part, nonwoven fabric is used. A unique pattern is created, cut, combined using heat, and processed. As the complex designs have many curves, mechanizing production is difficult and most of the processing is done by hand.

“If the unwoven fabric is too thin, it will come apart when water is added and won’t take on its animal shape, but if the fabric is too thick, then the

tea won’t brew properly. We came to create the teabags by combining unwoven fabric of three different thicknesses, maintaining the shape but also allowing the tea to brew.”

After sales began for the dolphin-shaped teabag, they were shown in newspapers and on television, winning popularity, and they began receiving requests for sea turtle-shaped teabags, cat-shaped teabags, and more. One after another, Takahashi added products to meet these requests, developing a rich assortment of products, including the unusual deep sea animal series, the Paleozoic era animal series, and more.

The tea in the teabags varies based on the design of the teabag, with green tea, roasted green tea, black tea, herb tea, and more. The teabags are mainly sold online, but also at variety shops, resort facilities, and more, and there are many people who buy them as gifts for friends or use them as wedding presents.

It seems that the company has plans to make tea-time even more enjoyable and relaxing in the future, as it is working to turn new ideas into reality, including the development of a teabag that spins around in the cup. 







# Specified Skilled Worker: New Status of Residence

As a new status of residence, “Specified Skilled Worker” was established in April 2019.

SAWAJI OSAMU

“SPECIFIED Skilled Worker” is a new status of residence established in April 2019 for foreign nationals seeking to reside in Japan for the purpose of employment. Foreign nationals who have acquired a status of Specified Skilled Worker can work in fourteen specified industrial fields (see table) ([http://www.moj.go.jp/nyuukokukanri/kouhou/nyuukokukanri01\\_00127.html](http://www.moj.go.jp/nyuukokukanri/kouhou/nyuukokukanri01_00127.html)).

As of February 2020, the Japanese government has concluded a Memorandum of Cooperation (MOC) with twelve countries, primarily in Asia, to ensure the proper sending and acceptance of foreign nationals as Specified Skilled Workers, not least to eliminate malicious intermediary organizations. However, it is generally possible for foreign nationals of any country,

whether or not that country has executed an MOC with Japan and irrespective of whether it is a developing or a developed country, to acquire Specified Skilled Worker status. As of December 31, 2019, foreign nationals with Specified Skilled Worker status number 1,621 and hail from seventeen countries and regions, including Asia, Europe and South America. Japan is expected to accept up to 345,000 foreign nationals as Specified Skilled Workers over the next five years.

## SPECIFIED SKILL EXAM

In order to work in Japan with the new status, foreign nationals need to take both a skill exam and a Japanese language proficiency test. Skill exams are conducted several times a year for each field in order to measure whether foreign nationals possess a degree of knowledge or experience in the specified industrial fields in which they desire to work. Skill exams are conducted in Japanese, using Computer Based Testing (CBT), in which questions are set and answered using a computer, or pen-and-paper testing. Practical tests are also conducted for some fields. The first exams have already been conducted in a number of specified industrial fields, with exams in all fields scheduled to be available by March 31, 2020. From April 2020, foreign nationals who have entered Japan as a temporary visitor for the purpose of taking the exam will also be able to take the skill exam (<http://www.moj.go.jp/content/001313234.pdf>).

### Specified industrial fields in which foreign nationals with Specified Skilled Worker status can work

Nursing Care, Building cleaning management, Machine parts & tooling industries, Industrial machinery industry, Electric, electronics and information industries, Construction industry, Shipbuilding and ship machinery industry, Automobile repair and maintenance, Aviation industry, Accommodation industry, Agriculture, Fishery & aquaculture, Manufacture of food and beverages, Food service industry.


The Japanese language proficiency test is conducted through the Japan Foundation Test for Basic Japanese (JFT-Basic), newly established in April 2019 and held several times a year. Test-takers are required to achieve a result that demonstrates adequate proficiency in Japanese at the A2 level, using the “ability to engage in everyday conversation to a certain extent and handle daily life without difficulties” as a guideline. Alternatively, they need to take the Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT) conducted twice a year by the Japan Foundation and Japan Educational Exchanges and Services and be certified at the N4 (the ability to understand basic Japanese) level or higher. Under the foreign Technical Intern Training system, foreign nationals who have completed technical intern training (ii) or the technical intern train-

such as securing housing, opening a bank account, and making a mobile phone contract; providing Japanese language learning opportunities; holding orientation sessions to explain aspects of Japanese life such as etiquette and how to use public institutions; providing information on Japanese cultural traditions and local events; and providing consultations on living and working in Japan.

## INITIATIVES FOR A SOCIETY OF HARMONIOUS COEXISTENCE

Japan is aiming to achieve a society of harmonious coexistence where Japanese and foreign nationals can coexist safely and in peace by receiving foreigners in an appropriate manner. To that end, the Immigration Services Agency of Japan has assigned “Accepting Environmental Coordinators” in eight regional immigration bureaus and three district immigration services across Japan. These officers are charged with duties such as listening to the opinions of regional public bodies and other relevant organizations and offering consultations on how to improve the environment to accommodate foreign nationals.

In addition, the Immigration Services Agency of Japan in cooperation with the relevant Ministries and Agencies has put together a “Guidebook on Living and Working.” The guidebook contains a wide range of information necessary for living in Japan, such as procedures for entry/residence, childbirth/parenting, education and taxes.

Further, in collaboration with the relevant Ministries and Agencies, a center for supporting foreign residents will be established in 2020 in Yotsuya, Shinjuku City, Tokyo as a hub for the comprehensive promotion of harmonious coexistence with foreign nationals. The Center will provide wide-ranging support, including the acceptance of international students and facilitating their employment in Japan, safeguarding the human rights of foreigners, consultations relating to legal problems and visas, and promoting the employment of foreign nationals in Japan including in rural areas. 



Left, skill exams for Specified Skilled Worker status are conducted using either CBT (Computer Based Testing), pen-and-paper testing, or practical testing. Tests may also be conducted in combination. (Photo: Skills testing being conducted using CBT)

Right, *Guidebook on Living and Working*

ing (iii) are exempt from the skill exam and Japanese language proficiency test.

Foreign nationals who formally acquired Specified Skilled Worker status after some procedures such as conclusion of an employment contract, application for a visa, and issuance of the status can receive support from the accepting organization (employer) or from a registered supporting organization entrusted by the accepting organization to ensure a safe and comfortable living and working environment in Japan. Such support includes, for example, airport pick-up when entering the country; assistance with procedures and formalities associated with tasks

## A Daily Life Support Portal for Foreign Nationals

[http://www.moj.go.jp/nyuukokukanri/kouhou/nyuukokukanri10\\_00055.html](http://www.moj.go.jp/nyuukokukanri/kouhou/nyuukokukanri10_00055.html)





# Painless Blood Sugar Testing

The prototype blood glucose sensor connects with a smartphone  
Photo: Courtesy of Light Touch Technology Inc.

**A Japanese venture company has developed a device that can test blood sugar levels without drawing blood from patients.**

**SAWAJI OSAMU**

ACCORDING to surveys conducted by Japan's Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, Japan's diabetes patients numbered 3.17 million in 2014 and 3.29 million in 2017. Meanwhile, the International Diabetes Federation has said that the total number of diabetes sufferers worldwide numbered 460 million in 2019, with the total expected to balloon to 700 million by 2045.

Diabetes can largely be categorized as either "type

1" or "type 2." Type 1 sufferers tend to be infants or young people who begin to show symptoms when an autoimmune disorder or other condition causes their insulin-secreting cells to start breaking down. On the other hand, type 2 patients are mostly middle aged or older, with the onset of diabetes precipitated by a combination of hereditary factors, overeating, lack of exercise and other causes.

Many diabetes patients need to use a glucose meter to measure their blood sugar every day. This requires that they prick the end of a finger and wipe the blood onto a testing paper attached to the glucose meter (a sensor). These patients need to withstand the pain that comes from having to draw blood from their fingertips 4-5 times per day. For type 1 sufferers in particular, a single year may see them needled 3,000 times by glucose meters and insulin injections. They also need to keep buying new needles and testing paper, since these are thrown away after each use.

This is where Light Touch Technology Inc., a venture company in Osaka, has developed a prototype blood glucose sensor that can measure blood sugar



Pricking a finger with a conventional glucose meter  
Photo: Courtesy of Light Touch Technology Inc.



Light Touch Technology President Yamakawa Koichi with the prototype sensor  
Photo: Sawaji Osamu

levels without drawing blood. This is the first non-invasive blood glucose sensor to meet the measurement precision standards of the International Organization for Standardization (ISO).

Light Touch Technology President Yamakawa Koichi says, “I have a friend whose child was diagnosed with type 1, and it’s through them that I learned what a large burden blood sugar testing places on the individual and the family. This led me to develop a device that can measure blood levels more easily.” Yamakawa has worked on development of state-of-the-art laser technologies for thirty years, as a researcher for the National Institutes for Quantum and Radiological Science and Technology (QST).

The sensor that Yamawaka developed is a circular cylinder only 15 cm long. The small cylinder sensor shines a laser, and by pointing that laser at your fingertip, you can measure the concentration of glucose in your bloodstream. You feel no pain nor heat from the laser, and it completes its measurement in a matter of seconds. It can then send the results of the test to your smartphone.

A paper published roughly thirty years prior was the first to assert that a near infrared laser with a wavelength of 2 microns could be used to measure bloodstream glucose. While many companies have

tried to develop a non-invasive blood sugar sensor in the time since, none have achieved practical application. A major reason is that near infrared lasers detect not only glucose, but also the other constituent elements of a patient’s blood. Yamakawa, however, has developed a new extremely high-precision, middle infrared laser with a wavelength of 9 microns which succeeds at only picking up glucose content.

“Many patients have said that they have been eagerly awaiting this device, and that they want me to find a practical implementation as soon as possible. There have also been several inquiries from Asia and the Middle East, both regions which have seen a dramatic rise in diabetes patients in recent years,” says Yamakawa.

To achieve practical application of this technology, Yamakawa established Light Touch Technology in 2017, as a venture spun off from QST. With the cooperation of an NPO that supports type 1 patients and their families, Light Touch Technology are continuing to collect/analyze measurement data and work on R&D to miniaturize the device and gear up for mass production. They aim to begin sales in 2022, once they obtain authorization from the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare.

This blood glucose sensor may also prove useful in identifying blood sugar spikes, which are easily overlooked with regular diagnostic methods. A “spike” is when blood sugar rises suddenly after eating. If unaddressed, it can damage blood vessels and advance arterial sclerosis. If people can easily measure glucose using this sensor, it will be much easier to find these symptoms. If this sensor is adopted by hospitals, it will serve to massively decrease the burden that glucose measurement places on doctors and nurses as well.

This technology can also be used to measure cholesterol and triglyceride levels. It may be used to sense airborne pathogens, diagnose illnesses by shining the laser on tears or urine, or in other wide-ranging applications.

“In the future, I would like to see the sensor set up in households and offices, where it automatically informs people about their health,” says Yamakawa. ■



# Paper Connecting Fukushima with the World

Sylvia Gallagher from New Zealand is helping to pass down the centuries-old tradition of *washi* paper making in Iwaki City, Fukushima Prefecture.

SUGIYAMA MAMORU



THE people of Tohno in Iwaki City, Fukushima Prefecture started to produce Tohno Washi over 400 years ago to make the most of the high-quality paper mulberry cultivated in the area. At the height of prosperity, there were over 600 *washi* paper makers. However, this number has continued to decrease as the demand declines, and the last remaining producer ceased mulberry cultivation in 2010. In order to pass down this traditional technique of making washi to future generations,

Tohno's local community development organization established a washi workshop. In 2015, they also started to train individuals who are willing to assume the responsibility of producing Tohno Washi to make graduation and award certificates with the support of the Local Vitalization Cooperator, a program of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications. Sylvia Gallagher, who hails from New Zealand, joined the project in Autumn 2019 as Iwaki City's first non-Japanese Local Vitalization Cooperator.

All photos: Sugiyama Mamoru



- 1 Sylvia Gallagher
- 2 Gallagher making paper
- 3 Calligraphy by Sylvia Gallagher (center)

Gallagher has enjoyed Japanese anime since childhood and started to teach herself Japanese when she was a high school student so that she could read Japanese manga and novels in their original language. While at university, where she majored in world history, she began taking a more serious approach to her study of Japanese. After graduating from university, she decided that she wanted to live in Japan - even if only for a short period of time - and applied for the JET Programme, which provides non-Japanese nationals with language teaching opportunities at Japanese schools. She arrived in Japan in 2017, and started to work as an assistant language teacher (ALT) at schools in Iwaki City, Fukushima Prefecture, a place devastated by the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake.

"I first came across the name Fukushima in news reports on the earthquake when I was in my final year of high school," says Gallagher. "When I was at university, I enrolled in a program that invited university students from Asian and Oceanian countries to Japan to facilitate intercultural exchange. I spent time in northern Ibaraki Prefecture at the time, which is not far from Iwaki City, and learned about the reconstruction efforts following the earthquake. So I have been interested in Fukushima for quite some time."


In addition to assisting English lessons as an ALT at junior high-schools in the city, she also worked as a volunteer in Minamisoma City in northern Fukushima Prefecture, another one of the areas hit by the disaster. The interaction with the locals and with people from around the world who gathered there made her want to explore other types of activities. The search eventually led her to the Local Vitalization Cooperator program and the efforts being made to pass down Tohno Washi production to future generations.

Gallagher chose washi production because she knew washi was used to repair artworks in New Zealand. But the primary reason why she had gravitated toward washi was its intrinsic beauty. At the workshop in Tohno she participates in all the traditional techniques of paper making from

preparing the paper mulberry fibers to crafting the paper itself. The washi paper she produces is used to make the graduation certificates that are presented to elementary, junior high school and high school children in the town.

"Imagining the children receiving their certificates makes me really happy," Gallagher says.

While working as a volunteer in Minamisoma City, Gallagher and two of her ALT colleagues from the UK came up with the idea of making a picture book. She has always enjoyed drawing, she says, and wanted to share the current state of Fukushima Prefecture through the book. "While many people in some areas of Fukushima Prefecture were forced to evacuate from their hometown immediately after the Great East Japan Earthquake and the accident at the nuclear power station, people determined to reconstruct those areas have started to return. They are making the most of the networks established both in and out of Japan following the earthquake, encouraging the emergence of exciting movements. I too want people around the world to know more about Fukushima, where there are always new encounters to be had," she says.

Gallagher and her former colleagues are working toward the publication of the picture book in the United Kingdom, and she sincerely hopes to use Tohno Washi for the printing of the book. 



Gallagher's business card, made of Tohno Washi, is decorated with one of her drawings

# SINGING AND DANCING TO ENTERTAIN ENVOYS



The traditions and culture of the Ryukyu Kingdom are concentrated in the *kumiodori*, a distinctly Okinawan style of musical theater with a 300-year history.

SASAKI TAKASHI

PLAYING the traditional *sanshin* and *koto* (stringed instruments), *fue* flute and *taiko* drum, the chorus gives voice to the characters' emotions. At the climax of the performance, the actors on stage refrain from dialogue and movement altogether, leaving everything to the sounds and words of the chorus. Dressed in period costumes, words once used by the warrior families of the Ryukyu Kingdom ring out. This is the *kumiodori*, a unique form of musical theater.

The Ryukyu Kingdom (present-day Okinawa), an independent state for about 450 years beginning in the fifteenth century, conducted trade with the imperial Chinese dynasties of the day through tributes to the Ming and Qing dynasties. The kingdom flourished as an intermediary for trade between Japan and southeast Asia. When a new king ascended the



throne in the Ryukyu Kingdom, he would be officially crowned by envoys of the Chinese emperor, known as *sapposhi*. The kumiodori was held as an entertainment to cordially receive this Chinese imperial envoy party. It was created by Tamagusuku Chokun, a dance magistrate who oversaw all court art, and is said to have been first performed in 1719 by warriors in the courtyard of Shuri-jo Castle.


While based on ancient music and traditional dances unique to Okinawa, the kumiodori incorporates elements of the *noh* and *kabuki* performing arts of Japan. Confucian values, which were the norm in China at the time, also impacted the dances, with performances on the themes of loyalty and parental duty mainly being performed. Kakazu Michihiko, artistic director and planning and production manager at the National Theatre Okinawa, says, “The Kumiodori was court art for the entertainment of envoys from abroad. It must also have been a means of diplomacy full of wisdom and ideas for the small kingdom to survive between China and Japan.”

While the kumiodori has seen difficulties in survival, it has also amassed 300 years of history. The Ryukyu Kingdom was incorporated into Japan as Okinawa Prefecture following the Meiji Restoration of 1868, and since then, the artists who had once been under the protection of the court moved their stages

to town theaters, passing on the kumiodori. Additionally, towards the end of the Second World War, Okinawa became a harsh battlefield that pulled in not just soldiers but also ordinary citizens, and many supporters of the traditional arts lost their lives.

In 1972, Okinawa was returned to Japan after long being under American authority after the war, and the kumiodori was registered as a National Important Intangible Cultural Property. A department to study the art form was established at the Okinawa Prefectural University of Arts, which opened in 1986, and performance opportunities greatly increased when the National Theatre Okinawa opened in 2004. The dances were added to the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, becoming one of the many traditional arts representative of Japan.

The kumiodori played a central role in ancient Okinawan culture, but it is relatively unfamiliar to ordinary people when compared to folk songs, dances, and other Okinawan folk art. Given that it is court art meant to entertain foreign envoys, kumiodori leaves a very esoteric impression, and can only be performed in a few places. This is why Kakazu and others have begun to incorporate performances with new styles so that more people can become familiar with the dances. As part of this, there is a performance held each year at the National Theatre Okinawa to popularize the dances. Last year they included a kumiodori adaptation of *Cinderella* in the classic program. They have also adapted the picture book *Swimmy* for children, reimagining the story in the kumiodori style.

Kakazu says, “The kumiodori is a type of art that was created precisely because this was a small country, and it speaks of our unique history and culture. As more people become familiar with the charm of the dances, I hope that we can properly pass on to the next generation the spirit of our predecessors, who had to grit their teeth as they held fast to the kumiodori and its traditions.” 



The chorus and dancers in rehearsal  
Photo: Tanaka Satoshi



Yui Rail

# Okinawa by Monorail



The Okinawa Monorail

**The Okinawa Monorail, popularly known as Yui Rail, provides tourists with access to a number of places and attractions blessed by beautiful blue skies and the natural beauty of the sea, as well as the long history of Okinawa's unique culture influenced by the 450-year history of the Ryukyu Kingdom.**

SAWAJI OSAMU

POPULARLY known as Yui Rail, the monorail system operated by Okinawa Urban Monorail, Inc. travels the 17 kilometers between Naha Airport in Naha City and Tedako-Uranishi in Urasoe City in about 40 minutes. It opened in August 2003, providing service between Naha Airport Station and Shuri Station, and was extended to Tedako-Uranishi from Shuri in October 2019.

Before the monorail came into service, automobiles were the primary means of transportation in Okinawa. Given the increasing concentration of the population and businesses in Naha City, the largest city of Okinawa, traffic congestion had become a very serious problem. Yui Rail was built to overcome this problem. The monorail's name comes from the phrase *yui maaru*, which is Okinawan dialect meaning "mutual support."

In 2004, Yui Rail transported approximately 11

million passengers, which has grown to around 19 million in 2019, becoming a primary means of transportation for local residents and visiting tourists with its on-time performance unaffected by traffic congestion.

The two-coach Yui Rail trains are unique, with their particularly Okinawan style. The design of the train features red lines along the sides of the cars with images of the iconic Shuri-jo Castle and seat covers done in the Ryukyu Kasuri pattern of traditional Okinawan clothing. People traveling on the trains can enjoy a great view from the trains' elevated position 10 meters above the ground, and easy access to Okinawan sightseeing spots.

The Naha City Traditional Arts and Crafts Center is one popular tourist location. On Kokusai Street, it is amidst one of the largest shopping areas in Okinawa, just five minutes' walk from Makishi Station. Okinawa

All photos: Tanaka Satoshi





A workshop at the Naha City Traditional Arts and Crafts Center



Kinjo-cho stone paved path

has a variety of arts and handcrafts, influenced by the long history of trade with neighboring countries that has continued since the Ryukyu Dynasty (1429-1879) ruled Okinawa.

The Center boasts an impressive selection of works that are available for purchase, including Ryukyuan Bingata cloth dyed in vivid colors, beautiful Ryukyuan lacquerware, Shuri cloth, Shisa statues, Tsuboya-ware (pottery for daily use), and examples of Ryukyuan glassblowing. Visitors can also try their hand at these five traditional crafts in the Center's workshop.

Naminoue-gu Shrine sits at the top of a bluff overlooking the Port of Naha, around 15 minutes from Asahibashi Station on foot. It is not known exactly when this shrine was built. Naminoue-gu Shrine has long been a spiritual place for local Okinawans. It became a shrine dedicated to *nirai kanai*, the mythical source of all life or utopia, seen as the sea gods, to ensure a bountiful harvest.

The Ryukyu Kingdom had a deep faith in

Naminoue-gu Shrine. The King is believed to have visited the shrine every New Year's Day, praying for the dynasty's prosperity. Located under the bluff is Naminoue Umisora Park, which has a beach for swimming, snorkeling and barbecues.

Another popular spot is Shuri-jo Castle Park, a 15-minute walk from Shuri Station. Partially opened to the public in 1992, the park was restored with a focus on the castle's role as the center of politics, diplomacy and culture during the Ryukyu Kingdom era. Buildings were restored and the park was extended in later years.

In 2000, "Gusuku Sites and Related Properties of the Kingdom of Ryukyu" were registered as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. ("Gusuku" means castle.) In the wake of the October 2019 fire, some areas of the park are off-limits. Meanwhile, around 80% of the area of the park prior to the fire has already been made accessible to the public, and people can visit places like Shureimon, one of the main gates to the complex (restored in 1958) and Iri-no-azana, a modern lookout tower overlooking downtown Naha and the sea.

Shuri-jo Castle Park is surrounded by traditional streets and structures reminiscent of the old dynasty, such as the Kinjo-cho stone paved path located on the southern slope of the castle park. Limestone was arranged in a mosaic pattern to pave the path in the early sixteenth century. The entire sloping path stretches approximately 300 meters with old private houses standing along both sides, creating a certain ambience unique to Okinawa.

Ride Yui Rail and enjoy the natural beauty of Okinawa's blue skies and seas, and its unique culture developed by the long history of the Ryukyu Kingdom. 7



Naminoue-gu Shrine



Courtesy of Kaminoyama City



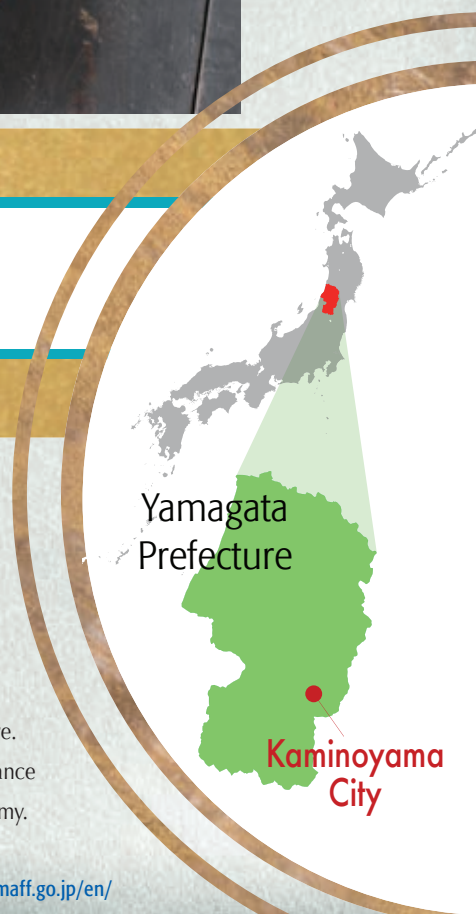
GI JAPAN PRODUCTS

## URUI

### Ozasa Urui

Urui is a “mountain vegetable” (*sansai*) characterized by its slimy texture and slightly bitter taste. In inland areas of Yamagata Prefecture, urui has long been eaten as one of the precious green vegetables of winter and spring. A type of urui known as “Ozasa Urui” is cultivated in conditions that closely resemble those in which the foundation species of the plant originally grew wild, in the foothills of the Zao mountain range in Kaminoyama City, Yamagata Prefecture. Harvested in the spring, Ozasa Urui has a beautiful green and white appearance and, compared with wild urui, is less bitter, more crunchy and extremely slimy.

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