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## ABSTRACT

Kyoto, Japan's capital for more than a millennium, has developed many handicraft industries catering to the increasingly sophisticated demands of the Imperial court, the aristocracy and prosperous townspeople. The hand-woven silk produced in the Nishijin area in the north of Kyoto city is one of the most renowned of these. For the past few decades, however, this age-old craft industry has been facing an unprecedented crisis as a result of continual economic recession, overall changes in lifestyle and the difficulties of securing successors to carry on the craft. This paper will examine the historical background of the development of the specific mode of production and trade in Nishijin textiles; it will then analyse the nature of the crisis and describe various efforts to maintain and revitalise the heritage in the face of stringent economic circumstances. What the present study ultimately aims to do is to reconsider possible ways of preserving handicraft traditions in the modern world and to explore their cultural meanings.

## Keywords

silk-weaving, looms, craftsmanship, local industry, authenticity, life style changes, Kyoto, Japan, kimono, cottage industry, Nishijin, Nishijin-ori.

## Introduction

The city of Kyoto was the national capital of Japan for more than a millennium from the late 8th century until the late 19th century,<sup>1</sup> and has developed many refined handicraft industries catering to the increasingly sophisticated demands of the Imperial court, the

aristocracy and prosperous townspeople. Well-known handicraft products of Kyoto include ceramics, lacquer ware, textiles, prints, fans, dolls, and sweets, among others. Even farm products, vegetable pickles and the local cuisine are supposed to have a special delicacy and brand quality if they have the prefix of *Kyō-* such as *Kyō-*

*yasai* (vegetables of Kyoto), *Kyō-tsukemono* (pickles of Kyoto) or *Kyō-ryōri* (Kyoto cuisine) as the name implies that the products have been able to satisfy the highly sophisticated tastes of the people of Kyoto.

The hand-woven silk known as *Nishijin-ori* (西陣織) produced in the Nishijin area in the northern part of Kyoto city is one of the most renowned of all the handicrafts. The name refers to specific types of silk that have long been produced in the Nishijin area, mainly as materials for Japanese national costume - kimono and *obi*. As such, it claims to materially embody the most sophisticated handicraft technology of weaving to be found anywhere in the world, representing the unique Japanese aesthetic - the delicate seasonal sensibilities, concepts of colour and design, cultural sentiments related to religious festivals, beliefs, and so forth. Thus the claim that Nishijin weaving is one of the most valuable cultural heritages of the country and needs to be preserved and continuously re-produced seems to be legitimate to many Japanese concerned with culture, tradition and history. [Plate 1]

Yet the current situation of Nishijin silk appears to challenge these aspirations from every angle. Over the centuries, those involved in Nishijin production and trade have become used to the fluctuations in the market for

luxury goods. The onset of the industrial revolution, mechanisation, mass production and the importation of textiles during the late 19th and early 20th centuries created one of those critical crises, as did the uncertainties of the wartime and postwar periods. The incessant domestic political and military strife during the 15th and 16th centuries damaged the industry, but during the subsequent Edo period (1603-1868) protective measures were introduced and the trade was firmly established as a major industry of the country with continuing state support. In fact, the weaving industry at Nishijin has often been characterised by the tenacity with which it has been able to overcome and recover from these crises, and to maintain the living tradition while continually innovating. Thanks to the postwar economic boom in particular, Nishijin weaving was able to establish itself as one of the most lucrative local industries, not only in Kyoto, but in the entire nation.

Many of those involved in the trade, however, seem to agree that the present crisis is of a different kind, and is one from which recovery in any meaningful sense is most unlikely. Recent statistics show a continuous decline in the number of corporations, looms and weavers in the Nishijin area. The total sales in 2008 remained at around 20% of its plateau in 1990 and have declined even further since then (Nishijin Textile Industrial Association [NTIA])



**Plate 1**  
Elaborate sash for a kimono. Photo: author.

2011). The so-called 'cottage industry' or family businesses (家内工業) that have been established as the major mode of production of Nishijin-ori appear to be almost on the brink of extinction, meaning that craftspeople equipped with the sophisticated techniques required for its continued production are no longer coming forward. Numerous attempts have been made to change the situation and boost the industry once again. Exhibitions, festivals, open houses, training schools, weaving competitions and other initiatives have been organised and pursued by the Nishijin Textile Industrial Association, the co-operative organisation of the Nishijin textile manufacturers, and other concerned parties such as individual craft artists, relevant departments in the municipal government and research organisations. Yet most of these efforts have had little impact in revitalising the industry to any significant extent, and have ceased after years of trial, reflecting the way interest in the process is diminishing.

The aim of the present study is to explore how the traditional craft of Nishijin weaving may be re-positioned and invigorated in these stringent economic circumstances. On the basis of anthropological fieldwork carried out in the Nishijin area in the autumn of 2006, and also in 2012, this article will examine the historical background to the development of the specific modes of production and trade in Nishijin textiles, and will analyse the nature of the crises and dilemmas inherent in the current revitalisation efforts. What the present study ultimately aims for is to reconsider possible ways of preserving handicraft traditions in the modern world and to explore their cultural meanings.

## A brief history of Nishijin weaving in Kyoto

The history of weaving in Kyoto goes back to the 5th century when immigrants from the continent began to be settled in the western part of Japan. In particular, the Hata people (秦) from the southern part of the Korean peninsula, established an influential settlers' community in the area of Sagano, to the west of present-day Kyoto, around the late 5th century, introducing and spreading the advanced technologies of the continental civilization, including the manufacture of iron, ceramics, textiles and construction techniques.<sup>2</sup> It is said that the Hata accumulated considerable wealth by constructing dykes on Katsura river, reclaiming a substantial portion of

wasteland in Kadono (葛野) and bringing it under cultivation (Jeong: 2007, pp.39-40). The Hata people introduced not only advanced agricultural technologies, but also new techniques in wood and metal craftsmanship, sericulture and silk weaving. With the advantage of a more advanced civilization and the mastery of literacy, the immigrants from the continent, referred to as *toraijin* (渡來人, which literally means 'the people who had come over the water') were able to maintain close ties with the ruling families of the settled country, assisting them in their struggle to obtain a political and military primacy over the Japanese archipelago (Sasaki 1932: pp.135-136). Even today, not very far from the Kōryūji temple (廣隆寺), the tutelary temple of the Hata clan located in Uzumasa, Ukyō Ward of Kyoto, one finds a shrine dedicated to the god of silkworms, indicating the close connection between the development of the silk weaving industry in this area and the Hata clan.<sup>3</sup>

The court set up a new Office of Weaving, *oribenotsukasa* (織部司), in charge of textile production, and the Uzumasa area of weavers was already the undisputed centre of weaving in Japan at the beginning of the Heian period (794-1185 A.D.) (Respicio: 2007, p.321). Later, with the gradual weakening of the state apparatus, the weavers and other related workers spread out into the surrounding area and continued to produce fine quality silk textiles under the continued influence of new weaving techniques from the continent. It was, however, only in the 15th century that the name of *Nishijin* (西陣) whose literal meaning is 'west camp' began to appear in historical records as a weavers' quarter of Kyoto. It is believed that the name was derived from the fact that textile workers who fled from Kyoto during the Ōnin war (1467-1477), a civil war that lasted more than ten years and destroyed much of the city, returned to the area where the west war camp of *Yamana Sōzen* (山名宗全) was based during the Ōnin war, and began to form a distinct community after the war was over.<sup>4</sup>

During the more than two hundred years of peace in the Edo period (1603-1868), Nishijin textile production flourished, enjoying many privileges under the protection of the state. It is said, for instance, that with special permission from the Shogunate (the Japanese feudal military government), Nishijin weavers were able to become the chief producers of high quality textiles in the country by having a monopoly of the silk thread imported

from China. While there were about twenty weaving districts (*machi*) in Nishijin toward the end of the 16th century, one hundred years later, at the end of the 17th century, the number had reached one hundred and sixty, with some seven thousand weavers working in the area (Taniguchi et. al.: 1993, pp.13-14; NTIA: 2012, p.2). New weaving designs and techniques were introduced from China as well as from Europe, and these were subsequently adopted and produced domestically by the weavers at Nishijin. The techniques of *kinran* (gold brocade) and *donsu* (silk satin damask) were introduced from China, while *shuchin* (figured satin), *rasha* (woollens), and *birodo* (velvet) came from Portugal and Spain. Complicated brocade weaving known as *mon-ori* (紋織) for which Nishijin is still famous, was developed by using *sorabikitakahata* looms (draw looms) in which a person sits at the top of the loom and raises the warp threads by hand so that patterns can be created using the weft. Further developments in spinning techniques made it possible to weave not only *kinran* and *donsu*, but even *chirimén* (crepe) which requires a strong twisted yarn (NTIA, *ibid.*). [Plate 2]

In the late Edo period, however, Nishijin's monopoly of textile production declined with the emergence of new weaving towns in other parts of Japan, and also with the erosion of the privileges enjoyed by Nishijin following the

withdrawal of Shogunate protection (Naramoto: 1969, pp.223-224). The Nishijin industry, known for its exclusive high-quality silk weaving, was further damaged by the decree of 1841 which curtailed the production of luxury goods, amidst the confusion of the final years of Japanese military rule. Despite these unfavourable conditions, Nishijin still had control over the textile market in the country, owing to the existence of kimono wholesalers in the Muromachi, a street adjacent to the Nishijin area to the east, and also to the superior design quality it had developed over the centuries. This had been possible, it is said, due to the fact that Nishijin was in a cultural district in the Kamikyō Ward of Kyoto where, in addition to the Imperial palace itself, there was a concentration of famous tea ceremony houses, classical theatres, painters' studios, shrines and temples, and so on (Taniguchi et. al.:1993, p.14). These traditional artists and religious institutions are still among the major clients and patrons of the kind of sophisticated silk textiles that are produced at Nishijin.

However, Nishijin was faced by yet another major crisis in the early years of the Meiji period (1868-1912) when its production and the demand for its products was nearly halved as a result of the transfer of the Japanese capital to Tokyo in 1869, and by the gradual change in lifestyles and the adoption of western dress. As a part of



Plate 2  
Nishijin kimono. Photo: author.

an attempt to revitalise the industry, Nishijin manufacturers dispatched representatives to Europe to study new weaving technologies and subsequently imported a Jacquard loom from France. This was an important innovation. Instead of a person raising the warp manually, as in the *sorabikitakahata* loom, that function was now performed by the Jacquard mechanism which used a string of punch cards and speeded up the weaving process dramatically. Many new types of chemical dyes were also introduced around this time, and the combination of the Jacquard loom and the new dyes introduced new elements into the already sophisticated designs produced at Nishijin.

Japan's involvement in the two World Wars was critical; silk weaving was considered to be a 'peace time industry'. During the wars the government declared further cuts in the production of luxury goods, which meant the Nishijin workers could be conscripted and eventually left their workplaces. Even during the economic boom in the 1950s and 1960s, Nishijin still faced difficulties in recruiting new workers, as a result of accelerated urbanisation and the economic development of the country as a whole. The inferior working conditions, characteristic of small-scale cottage industries that rose in number during the unstable postwar years, made the work unattractive to young recruits into the industry.<sup>5</sup> Although the total sum of sales of Nishijin products continued to increase due to the overall postwar economic boom, the inevitable trend towards westernised lifestyles, including clothing, aggravated by competition between the Nishijin manufacturers as well as from other textile centres in the country, created an unfavourable climate for the Nishijin industry well before the actual statistics began to show a downward curve.

## Social relationships in the production and retailing system at Nishijin

The late Professor Tamara Hareven, an American social historian who has produced perhaps the most thorough studies of the Nishijin weaving industry available in a western language, summarises the meaning of Nishijin in the following way (Hareven: 2002, pp.25-26):

*Nishijin is the name for three interrelated entities: the district of Kyoto west of the Imperial Palace, in which*

*silk-brocade weaving has been carried out for five centuries; the production process, which is complicated and requires the finest weaving skills in Japan; and the unique product - the brocade used for priestly garments and for obi [sash for the kimono] that are worn on the highest ceremonial occasions, such as weddings, the tea ceremony, Noh plays, and traditional festivals. Nishijin cloth is considered informally a cultural property of Japan. For the weavers, artisans, manufacturers, and tradesmen who work and live there, Nishijin, which has been nicknamed mura [village], represents a way of life - a tradition of family-based craftsmanship and industry that has been embedded in the community for centuries. Over many generations, Nishijin manufacturers, craftspeople, and shopkeepers have developed a strong identity as "Nishijin people."*

Like many of the traditional Japanese craft industries, the basic mode of production of Nishijin silk textiles is based on a minute division of labour. Producing a Nishijin silk brocade, for instance, involves numerous steps; planning the basic design and structure of the textile, preparing the design sheet which enables the weaver to produce the design, dyeing the yarn, warping, preparing the punch cards by which the Jacquard loom operates, the actual weaving itself and finishing, to name just the major processes.<sup>6</sup> There are three kinds of looms in Nishijin production: power looms, handlooms and hand operated *tsuzure* (綴) looms. The first two looms can weave patterns using design sheets and a set of Jacquard punch cards. The *tsuzure* looms do not use this system but operate solely by the handicraft weavers placing the design under the warp. There are also two different types of finishing-work in Nishijin textiles. In the first type, the textiles are virtually complete as soon as the weaving is done as in the case of *obi*. The second type of finishing begins after the weaving is completed as in the case of the *shibodashi* process (creating a relief pattern in the woven textile) for the Nishijin *omeshi kimono*<sup>7</sup> and the *senkiri* (yarn-cutting) process of velvet textiles (NTIA: 2012, p.6). Each of these stages involves more detailed processes within it, each being the specialisation of a skilled craftsman trained in a small-scale family business.

The fact that each of the textile production processes has been carried out by small-scale independent family businesses generation after generation, rather than within a large-scale factory that encompasses all the required processes, creates a unique pattern of social relationships among the manufacturers, weavers and

**Plate 3**  
Handloom weaving at Nishijin. Photo: author.



other craftspeople responsible for the auxiliary processes, such as designers, pattern-makers, dyers, warpers, spinners and twisters, and harness makers. At the centre of textile production are the manufacturers called *orimoto* - the weaving masters - who conduct the whole production process: consulting and receiving orders, commissioning each task from the specialised craftspeople, connecting and liaising between different stages, and overseeing the final stage of production and delivery. The success or failure of a weaving master depends on his knowledge and sensibility regarding the structure and design of the completed textiles as well as on his ability to secure skilled craftspeople for each stage. The craftsmen refer to the *orimoto* who provide work for them, along with the materials they need and sometimes the looms as well, as 'masters' (*oyakata*, literally 'parent-status') and they often maintain an exclusive contract relationship with them over a relatively long period of time. [Plate 3]

While the relationship between the masters and craftspeople is clearly hierarchical, there exist few horizontal ties amongst the craftspeople working for different masters, particularly because the weaving masters are very competitive with one another and are highly protective of any potential leakage of information regarding their own products.<sup>8</sup> At Nishijin, the

hierarchical relationships have been maintained, not only between the manufacturers (*orimoto*) and the weavers and craftspeople involved in auxiliary processes, but also between manufacturers and the wholesalers, known as *tonya* (問屋), who issue orders to the manufacturers and are supposed to guarantee the sales of the final products. This created a pyramid of hierarchical relationships.

### Revitalising efforts and the dilemmas these create

The crisis in Nishijin that has already been debated for many decades seems to arise mainly from the difficulty of maintaining the traditional relationship between production and retail described above, as well as from general changes in taste and lifestyle. Again, Hareven (2002: pp.49-50) observes that Nishijin's crisis does not represent the classic situation of a traditional craft being displaced by industrialisation, as was the case in nineteenth-century Europe and the United States. Nishijin has remained a traditional industry in that it has not developed large-scale factories, even though some aspects of the production have been mechanised as in the adoption of Jacquard looms and power-looms in the late 19th century. It has also been partly digitised as can be seen in the gradual replacement of design sheets with

floppy discs since the 1980s. The fact that Nishijin's decline was not a result of industrialisation - in which case the problem would be irreversible - but of other economic and social factors, may indicate that there still is a chance of its survival.

The critical problem, however, is the difficulty in training and securing an ongoing supply of skilled craftspeople for each stage of Nishijin textile production. In the past, this has been possible within the framework of family businesses, as can be seen in the following cases.

#### Case study 1.

Mr. Tsuneki Higuchi (aged sixty-three in 2012) is running a manufacturing company at Nishijin. The company was founded by his grandfather, Manjirō Higuchi, during the Meiji period and he was succeeded by Mr. Higuchi's father, Tsunejirō and now by Mr. Higuchi himself. Mr. Higuchi's great-grandfather was a weaver working for one of the manufacturers at Nishijin during the late 19th century. While his first son succeeded to the weaver's work of his father, his second son, Manjirō, who later became the founder of the Higuchi Company was sent as a live-in apprentice (*dechibōkō*) to a manufacturing company where Manjirō's father and elder brother worked. Manjirō worked for the manufacturer for some twenty years learning the work and climbing the corporate ladder within the company. He was finally allowed to start a manufacturing company of his own and became an *orimoto*. Although the company has done good business for three generations, Mr. Higuchi's two daughters have pursued professional careers that are far removed from the traditional weaving industry (one is a pharmacist and the other a public accountant) and Mr. Higuchi sees little likelihood that his business will stay in the family.

#### Case study 2.

Mr. Risuke Iwasaki (aged eighty-three in 2006) was a famous weaver at Nishijin who was awarded the title of a Traditional Craftsman (*dentō kōgeisha*) by the Japanese Ministry of Economics and Industries. His family have been weavers for fourteen generations and he grew up with the sound of looms at home where all the family members were engaged in weaving, including his grandparents, parents and all of his elder siblings. He began to learn weaving techniques from his father in his late teens and became a fully-fledged weaver at around twenty years of age. He then worked for several different

family-based weaving factories and learned many different weaving techniques. In 1964, Mr. Iwasaki became a full-time employee of Mr. Higuchi's company and has since woven many excellent *obi* until he officially retired in the late 1990s. Despite his much admired craftsmanship, when he retired Mr. Iwasaki disposed of the looms he had worked on all his life. He did not see much of a future for a weaver's career, even at Nishijin, and therefore did not encourage any of his three daughters or their husbands to continue his work.

#### Case study 3.

Mr. Katsuhiko Terakawa (aged seventy in 2012) has been in the business of yarn dyeing at Nishijin for fifty-five years now. He was sent to a dyeing factory at Nishijin as a live-in apprentice when he was fifteen. After seven years learning the work, he opened a dyeing factory of his own at the age of twenty-two. In the 1960s and 1970s there was plenty of work at Nishijin and, in a family-based factory, Mr. Terakawa dyed various types of yarns with the help of his parents, two brothers and one male apprentice. His two sisters and his wife, whom he married in 1969, did supplementary work such as hanging the dyed yarn out to dry. With the down-turn in Nishijin, he has also reduced the scale of his factory where only two men now work - Mr. Terakawa himself and his forty-two year old son, Yoshihito, with some help from Mrs Terakawa. Mr. Terakawa's married sister, who lives nearby, also comes in to lend a hand when required. Some twenty years ago, there were about two hundred dyeing factories at Nishijin, but only about sixty are now in business, and less than 10% of them have a successor in place. Every year, five or six factories are closing down and in 2012 the 'youth' group [average age, forty to forty-five] of the Nishijin Dyers' Association had only thirteen members. Under these circumstances, Mr. Terakawa may be considered lucky in that his son decided to come into the business at a relatively early age. But, at the age of forty-two, his son is still unable to find a wife as not many young girls wish to marry a craftsman (*shokunin*) due to the negative image of long working hours and inferior working conditions compared to those of workers in modern corporations.

#### Case study 4.

Mr. Sōichi Hasegawa (aged sixty in 2012) was once one of the largest wholesalers (*tonya*) at Nishijin. The value of his annual sales peaked at over \$200,000,000, or more than ten per cent of the total value of sales of *obi*

transacted in Nishijin. His family has been in the business since 1950. Mr. Hasegawa's father, Minoru, was from Fukui Prefecture north-east of Kyoto and came to a Nishijin wholesaler as a live-in apprentice in the late 1920s. He learned the wholesaler's trade for more than ten years before he was called up and his company decided to close during the war. After the war, he wanted to go back to the same company, but the boss decided not to re-open the business. So Mr. Hasegawa's father started a small retailing business and later became a wholesaler of Nishijin products. In the 1950s, the curtailment decrees against the production of luxury goods were still in force and it was illegal to produce or retail high quality cloths such as Nishijin *obi* and *kimono*. But many weavers obtained yarns on the black market and wove and took their goods to the wholesalers at the risk of occasionally being arrested. With the economic growth of Japan in the 1960s and 1970s, all the businesses in Nishijin rapidly recovered and Mr. Hasegawa's was one of the most successful of these. During the upturn of the 1980s and 1990s, Mr. Hasegawa owned two seven storey buildings at Nishijin as well as a branch shop in Tokyo. In the face of the continual decline of Nishijin, however, Mr. Hasegawa decided in 2010 to dispose of all his real estate and moved his company to a small building where his father had once lived. Shortly before the move, Mr. Hasegawa had also managed to persuade his thirty-three year old son, Kōichi, who had heretofore shown little interest in the family business, to join the company and to learn the trade. Many interested people consider Mr. Hasegawa's move was very wise and farsighted, especially in view of the fact that many former Nishijin wholesalers have ceased trading altogether, and gone into the real estate business.

The above cases illustrate the critical position that the traditional apprentice system, known as *dechibōkō*, and the family-based business have occupied in both teaching the required skills and securing the continuity of the Nishijin weaving industry. As indicated, this traditional system is clearly under threat. Even where there is a successor to the family business, they are either having difficulties in finding a marriage partner or having to reduce the scale of the business considerably. The situation is much worse in the case of sub-contracting auxiliary workers. In 2012, for instance, it is said that there was only one surviving maker of wooden looms, essential for handicraft weaving, in the whole of Nishijin. Many also claim that most of the craftsmanship

will disappear when the present, aging generation retires.<sup>9</sup> Some of the Nishijin manufacturers, such as Obiya Sutomatsu or Katsura Weavers, have been able to recruit a small number of younger people in recent years, mostly female art college graduates with personal interests in weaving. However, the level of salary they can offer in the weaving industry is so much less than that in other modern sectors that they find it very difficult to attract male candidates. Also, the quality of short-term training in the company is not comparable to the thorough, seven and ten year apprenticeships that weavers and other craftspeople used to go through in the past.

While the craftsmanship of the Nishijin weavers and its fate has been much discussed in previous studies, it must be acknowledged that the finest quality of Nishijin textiles cannot be produced unless all the work at the prior auxiliary stages is done with equal expertise. And it is in fact at these prior stages where the issue of continuity is much more desperate than among the weavers, the manufacturers or the wholesalers. To deal with the increasing shortage of skilled hands, there have been numerous attempts to mechanise those processes, even to the extent of introducing a robot to replace human labour. These endeavours, in turn, create further crises in the viability of many small-scale family businesses specialising in different stages of Nishijin textile production, thereby creating a vicious circle. Furthermore, it creates a problem about authenticity. If some of the processes are mechanised the textiles can no longer be described as 'hand made'. Mechanisation also affects quality. In mechanically produced silks no more than twenty or thirty different coloured yarns can be used, whereas the complicated hand-woven Nishijin designs often employ more than one hundred different colours. [Plate 4]

Another dilemma faced by the Nishijin weaving industry arises from its traditional emphasis upon 'Japaneseness' and the feasibility of using that as a form of global branding. In late capitalist societies in Europe, such as Italy, as well as in some developing countries in Asia such as India and Indonesia, we hear that small scale local handicraft industries have been successfully revitalised and are expanding their markets worldwide, reclaiming their appeal to an increasing clientele in the era of post-Fordism. However, in the case of Nishijin textiles which were developed mainly by cultivating the 'uniquely Japanese aesthetic' embodied in traditional



**Plate 4**  
Yarn-dyeing at Nishijin. Photo: author.

costumes, it is not so easy to expand the market for them by turning them into a global brand. There have been Nishijin manufacturers who attempted to produce goods other than traditional costumes. The former Kawashima Textile Limited, founded in 1843, for instance, have been mass-producing wall fabrics, car seat covers, stage curtains, carpets and other furnishing fabrics since the late 19th century, and have received much praise for their products. Textiles from the Kawashima Company have decorated, for instance, the walls of the Japanese pavilion at the 1900 Paris Expo, the International Law Court in the Hague in the Netherlands and the westernised interiors of the Japanese Emperor's new residence in Tokyo. Indeed, in the early 1970s, an American anthropologist, Ronald Haak (1973: p.103) observed:

*Kawashima conceives of his company as a dual operation that sustains venerated hand skills at the same time that it pioneers some of the most advanced technology in the industry. Mr. Kawashima has made it his personal mission to see to it that the Japanese design traditions redound to the credit of his country by preparing distinguished goods for export and by decorating the trains and aircraft by which Japan declares itself an equal partner in the world of science and commerce. By these arrangements, the Kawashima plant is in some measure a microcosm of Japan itself.*

Upon visiting the company in the autumn of 2012, however, I found that it had been completely absorbed by a construction conglomerate that had a subsidiary company specialising in furnishing fabrics. The former Kawashima Textile was still in operation as part of the subsidiary company, but its founders, the Kawashima family, no longer owned a single share in the new amalgamated corporation. The traditional craft department of the company, thanks to its past fame, is still commissioned to produce textiles for well-known religious festivals such as the *Gion Matsuri* in Kyoto or the Rebuilding of the Shrine (*sengū*) at Ise, Nara Prefecture. However, it only produces on a nominal scale and mainly for exhibition purposes. The company employee I interviewed commented that she was uncertain how long the traditional craft department would survive as the parent company resolutely emphasises that it needs to make sizeable profits if it wishes to remain as part of the corporation.

Other ways of trying to find a breakthrough at Nishijin are the attempts to elevate the status of the craft to the level of art, i.e. presenting textiles as works of individual artistic creation produced primarily for aesthetic appreciation rather than practical use.<sup>10</sup> While such a transformation has been possible for certain types of traditional crafts in Japan such as ceramics, lacquer ware, fans, dolls, etc. (Inaga & Fister: 2007; Namiki et.al.: 2012), this seems much more difficult for a craft like

Nishijin weaving as the silks have been produced mostly for kimono and *obi*, even though a select few have always pursued the ideal of textiles as a form of artistic creation (*bijutsu orimono*).<sup>11</sup> Also, under the traditional production system that is based on the division of labour, it is rather difficult to claim a completed work as the exclusive creation of a single artist. Most of the textile artists in Nishijin do not actually weave the textile, or dye the yarns, or do any of the other production processes. Their job is to provide the basic ideas for the design and the colour schemes for the final product. The critical task for them then is actually to find all the right craftspeople, yarn-spinners, gold-leaf makers, warpers, dyers, weavers, and so on, who are able to produce a fabric that is as close as possible to their original design, and to coordinate their work. [Plate 5]

Despite these ambiguities, the textile artists, and the workshops or research centres run by them, are encouraged by the municipal authorities and academic institutions as an effective means for preserving and revitalising the craftsmanship that has been developed for centuries at Nishijin, and for arousing wider interest in this vanishing world among the general public. Much of the public money, therefore, that is assigned to the projects goes in this direction. Mr. Tatsumura Amane, the young successor of the Tatsumura Kōhō, a company that split from the Tatsumura Art Textiles (Tatsumura *Bijutsu*

*Orimono*), another leading manufacturer in Nishijin, founded in the late 19th century, for instance, is running regular workshops, public lectures and exhibitions about textile work in various parts of Kyoto, and teaches a class in traditional craft at Doshisha University, one of the prestigious private universities in Kyoto. The university is located to the east of the Nishijin district, facing the Imperial Palace, and has sustained interest in the study of the Nishijin weaving industry (See Honjō: 1935; Izushi: 1962, 1972; Kakino: 1976; Kuromatsu: 1951, 1969, 1970; Matsumoto: 1968; Miyagi: 1968; Tsuji: 1964 among others.). In 2012, the university was running twenty different projects as part of its community programme, with support from Kyoto City, some of which were related to the promotion of traditional crafts in Kyoto. Mr. Tatsumura Amane's class is a part of this programme. [Plate 6]

While such endeavours may attract media attention and arouse public interest, few in Nishijin believe that they will actually lead to the revitalisation of the industry in any meaningful sense, or to the improvement of the deteriorating lot of the craftspeople. A similar apathy may be observed about the activities of the Nishijin Textile Industrial Association to which a substantial sum of governmental subsidy is annually allotted in the hope of revitalising the industry. As a co-operative organisation of the Nishijin manufacturers, it is supposed to try to



**Plate 5**  
Sash with traditional design. Photo: author.



**Plate 6**  
Kimono display at Nishijin. Photo: author.

alleviate the difficulties faced by its members. Many feel, however, that most of its activities, such as organising festivals, kimono and *obi* collections, fashion shows, sales promotions, demonstrations of various weaving techniques and so on, may attract some tourists and benefit some of the top officials of the much bureaucratised Association, but do not affect *the tips of the twigs at the periphery* in the words of the disgruntled members.

## Conclusion

While the current difficulties in Nishijin no doubt reflect the unfavourable economic condition of the country as a whole, those faced by the Nishijin weaving industry display several unique features that seem to be interlinked, and to create further dilemmas when combined. Although there have been attempts to expand the application of Nishijin weaving techniques and designs to areas other than traditional costume - such as neckties, scarves, shawls, curtains, tapestries, wall fabrics, and so on, - kimono and *obi* still make up more than ninety per cent of its total production (Nishijin Textile Industrial Association: 2011, p.1). Yet the demand for traditional costume has been continuously declining as a result of changes in lifestyle and taste.

One response on the part of the retailers to counteract this trend has been what may be termed the 'ritualisation' of traditional costume. Since the early Meiji period when the trend for westernisation in housing, diet and clothing first began, many of the newly-emerging department stores and women's magazines tried hard to invent new rules and forms of etiquette as well as fashions, especially for women who wanted to wear traditional costume (Namiki et.al.: 2012, pp.144, 180-181, 244-249). Kimono, which literally means 'clothes' in Japanese, is no longer everyday clothing (*fudangi*, 普段着) that people wear for ordinary activities, but has become a special outfit that should be worn according to hundreds of elaborate rules. There are now, for instance, specific patterns, designs, colours, and shapes of kimono appropriate for certain age groups, ranks and occasions: colourful *furisode* (kimono with wider sleeves) for the unmarried, plain *tomesode* (kimono with narrower sleeves) for the married, soft dyed kimono instead of thicker woven kimono for the tea ceremony, black dyed kimono with family emblems (*kamon*, 家紋) for weddings,

single-coloured *tomesode* with subdued designs for formal visits and so forth. There are also special classes (*kitsuke kyōshitsu*) where people can learn how to wear kimono, and special licences for the instructors of such classes.<sup>12</sup>

While these new inventions and elaborations have contributed considerably to expanding the kimono market during periods of economic up-turn, they have also resulted in effectively alienating the majority of people in middle and lower income groups from wearing traditional costume, especially in the prolonged economic recession that Japan has been experiencing for the past two decades or so. As one female kimono, made of silk with an elaborate sash (*obi*) together with the special shoes, accessories and under-garments that go with it, easily costs about \$10,000, as of 2012, and can cost as much as \$100,000, it is said that, even when parents wish to buy a kimono for their daughter's coming of age ceremony (*seijinshiki*), the girl often asks for a car or a fur coat instead. Also, it is claimed that some Japanese opt to hold their wedding ceremonies abroad as a way of bypassing the ritual proprieties required for wearing kimono on such occasions.

Furthermore, in the case of Nishijin textiles, the added value that accompanies the branding of its products as 'traditional crafts' (*dentō kōgei*) tends to raise the price further, thereby alienating potential consumers even more. An elderly lady in Kyoto who is keenly interested in kimono deplors this situation. '*Once it enters the realm of dentō kōgei, it becomes something that ordinary people cannot afford*', she says. National costume has become like art objects, available only to an exclusive few. The irony of the situation is, therefore, that while terms like 'venerated traditions' or 'priceless craftsmanship' are important selling points for the manufacturers and retailers, the net effect of the raised prices these terms produce is to reduce the overall volume of consumption of their goods. The phenomenon, in turn, aggravates the already deteriorating condition of the craftspeople at the bottom of the production system, and consequently endangers the survival of the whole industry.

It would not be sufficient, however, to understand and explain the current difficulties of the Nishijin industry as simply the result of choosing to focus on a high end, exclusive and expensive niche market with too few

customers. Unlike in modern enterprises where production and retail can be coordinated with a targeted market, it has not always been possible to develop integrated 'strategies' in a kind of production system like the Nishijin industry that is based on minute division of labour in numerous independent family businesses. The critical issue affecting the Nishijin industry seems to be not so much one of poor strategic choices, but rather the incompatibility of traditional production and retail systems with changing tastes and trends in the modern world. It is the highly sophisticated craftsmanship that has sustained the unique quality and value of Nishijin textiles, and this craftsmanship has been nurtured under the traditional system of production: the small-scale family businesses and the system of long-term apprenticeships. Some manufacturers and retailers may survive and continue to trade, even under unfavourable market conditions, but they will do so at the expense of the sub-contracting craftspeople.

However, the continual closing down of family businesses specialising in different stages of Nishijin textile production means a permanent loss of those particular crafts, skills and experiences, as well as of the opportunities for teaching them to the next generation; such losses will inevitably impoverish the much-prized richness of the Nishijin weaving tradition. On the other hand, it seems clear that neither the official designation of a few craftspeople as 'Masters of Traditional Craft' under the state protection system, nor various attempts at touristic promotion, have been effective in providing the Nishijin craftspeople with enough of a living to prevent them from abandoning the trade altogether. The case of the Nishijin weaving industry in Japan, therefore, is seriously challenging our ideas about ways of preserving and maintaining the valuable heritage of traditional craft in an evolving modern context. ❏

## NOTES

1. Kyoto had remained the cultural centre of Japan with the continued residence of the Imperial family and the aristocrats until the Emperor moved his residence to Tokyo in 1869 after the Meiji Restoration. The political centre of power moved to Kamakura and later to Edo (present day Tokyo) after the 12th century with the establishment of military government (*Bakufu*).
2. Japanese historians, in their usual efforts to emphasise direct imports of continental civilization from China and to play down the influence of Korea in this process, claim that the Hata people were the descendants of the First Chinese Emperor, Ch'in (秦始皇; Ch'in Shih Huang, 259 BC - 210 BC), as the Chinese character adopted to write 'Hata' in Japanese, 秦, is the same as the one used to write 'Ch'in' in Chinese. The claim, however, is not substantiated by any concrete evidence, and historical records starting with *Nihon Shōki*, (The Chronicles of Japan), make clear the close connection of the Hata people with the ancient *Shilla* kingdom of Korea (57 BC - 935 AD).
3. Kōryūji is said to be the oldest temple in Kyoto having been built in 603 by Hata no Kawakatsu (秦河勝), one of the most influential of the Hata clan, upon receiving a Buddhist statue from Prince Shōtoku with whom Kawakatsu kept a very close relationship (Sasaki: 1932). This temple is also known by the names Uzumasa-dera (太秦寺) and Kadono-dera (葛野寺), and was formerly known as Hatanokimi-dera (秦公寺). The original temple was destroyed by the fires in 818 and 1150 and has been rebuilt several times since (<http://en.wikipedia.org> consulted 12.12.2012).
4. For this reason, Nishijin people consider 1467, the year when the Ōnin War broke out, as the beginning of the weaving industry in the area. They hold a special ceremony on November 11th every year at the Imamiya Shrine in Kita Ward, Kyoto, which is dedicated to *Orihime*, the female goddess of weaving. November 11th was declared 'Nishijin Day' in 1967 at the 500th anniversary of Nishijin, with the claim that it was the date when weavers started coming back to the area after the war. As one might expect, however, all these are invented traditions of recent origin.
5. It is said that while the numbers of weavers running independent shops of their own as small scale proprietors and those who weave with machines rented from existing manufacturers were 1,875 and 6,583 in 1940, they had changed to some 3,000 and 3,600 respectively by 1948 as many weavers formerly employed by the manufacturers became independent during the immediate postwar years (Taniguchi et. al.: 1993, p. 16).
6. *Sōkō* is a design interface device. The Jacquard transfers the information from the design sheets to the loom via this device.
7. *Omeshi* is a kind of *chirimen* (silk crepe) *kimono*. It is, however, distinguished from other *chirimen kimono* in that Nishijin *omeshi* is woven after dyeing the yarns while other *chirimen kimono* are usually dyed after weaving.
8. According to Hareven, this secrecy and the loyalty of the weavers and other craftspeople towards the masters who recognise and properly appreciate the value of their craftsmanship have been major impediments to the development of labour movements at Nishijin (Hareven: 2002, p. 102). For the characteristic features of the relationship between the weaving masters and subcontracting weavers at Nishijin, see also Haak (1975).
9. Most Nishijin manufacturers are small-scale family businesses operating less than nine looms: 30% have fewer than four and another 60% have between five and nine (NTIA: 2011, p.4; Moon: 2012, p. 12).
10. Inaga believes that some of the Kyoto craftsmen began to consciously see themselves as modernist artists, but craft-as-art was excluded from the official salon inaugurated under the auspices of the Ministry of Education in 1907, and it was not until 1927 at the eighth Imperial Salon (*Teiten*) that an artistic craft section was added (Inaga: 2007, p. 54).
11. Opinions are often divided among those engaged in Nishijin weaving with regard to its ultimate objectives. Some believe that it should aim for creative art work while others argue that the sustainability of the industry can only be attained by improving the viability of Nishijin textiles as goods for practical use, but which also appeal to a wider market. Some of the oldest companies in Nishijin are split in this way, and Mr. Tasumura Amane believes that his grandfather was 'driven out' (*oidasareta*) from the company founded by his great-grandfather, even though he was the eldest son and thus the

legitimate successor, because of his insistence upon the 'artistic' character of their work. That company, Tatsumura Art Textiles, is now run by the descendants of his grandfather's other siblings.

12. Most major department stores in modern Japan such as Takashimaya, Matsuzakaya, Mitsukoshi, Shiragiya and others started as retailers of Japanese traditional costume (*gofukuya* 呉服屋) in the 19th century.

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