



Picture 1
With guests from overseas on
Shirakabe Street in Yanai City

Reviving Traditional Regional Crafts and Promoting Participation from Overseas

—The Example of Super Global Fashion Workshop 2019—

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Japan's regions have long cultivated traditional crafts and local industries, but the advance of modernization and industrialization caused many of them to decline or disappear; old ways are being forgotten, both in the regions and beyond. However, since the 1990s, competition between the regions has intensified, as each promotes policies for local revitalization, to stem population decline and to promote regional attractiveness. Traditional crafts and fabrics are no exception to this trend.

During the Edo period, in Yamaguchi Prefecture, the westernmost of Honshu's prefectures, production of a fabric called Yanai-jima, also known as Yanai Stripes in English, flourished in the town of Yanai, in the eastern part of the prefecture, but disappeared in the Taisho era, unable to survive changing lifestyles and mechanization. After the discovery of an old loom in 1993, the Yanai-jima Association was established as a collaboration between industry, academia and government.



Picture 2
Coaster weaving experience at
Yanai Nishigura

Yanai City renovated a warehouse that been used to produce soy sauce, a local industry, as a city art and cultural facility. Revived as Yanai Nishigura, it is home to a dyeing and weaving workshop, a Yanai lantern experience workshop, and a gallery for citizens and tourists. Production of Yanai-jima centers on weaving coasters and place mats, and workshops on using plants as dye, particularly indigo.

The white-walled townscape (Picture 1) and traditional atelier space make Yanai an attractive destination for tourists. Therefore, at the Super Global Fashion Workshop (SGFWS) held in October 2019, faculty members and students from the University of Lapland University in Finland, the University of Hawaii Maui College and Yamaguchi Prefectural University visited Yanai Nishigura to participate in workshops. This was a really good opportunity to understand how to respond to guests from overseas.

The visitors got hands-on experience of coaster weaving. The warp was already set up on the looms, and participants could select the weft and weave a striped coaster to their liking (Picture 2). I found that if the history and characteristics of Yanai's Shirakabe Street and Yanai-jima were explained to guests in advance, in English, there was not much need for an interpreter after that. The staff seemed already familiar and comfortable with foreign tourists, so the workshop went smoothly.



Incidentally, in 2003, to mark the 10th anniversary of the revival of Yanai-jima, I was asked to produce and direct a fashion show, and to announce the items, and did so with the participation of my seminar students at that time. As a result of extensive media coverage, the show made Yanai-jima widely known. Even so, orders for kimono material did not increase, and we could not fully meet the expectations of the Yanai-jima Association.

However, members of the Association told me at the time that, as a result of my involvement in the show, the previously sober image of indigo dye was reborn as a brightly colored woven fabric that would appeal to young people.

Unlike people in group tours, people who travel to Japan from abroad by themselves have the freedom to stay in one place, and to slowly, carefully, follow a program for making things there. For example, wouldn't it be possible to create an environment where both dyeing and weaving were combined, or where people who were really interested could stay and make and dye what they wanted to make?

Kuga, a town adjacent to Yanai City (now merged with Iwakuni City), has the tradition of Kuga-Chijimi, Kuga cotton crepe. At about the same time as Yanai-jima's revival, the Iwakuni City Nishi Chamber of Commerce and Industry started efforts to revive Kuga cotton crepe, as a regional revitalization project. Initially, to promote branding, a dyeing and weaving artist from Kyoto was invited to try a new cotton crepe molding. At present, about 10 people are involved in making crepe with plant-dyed yarn, and produce products such as clothing and accessories.

Most of the people involved in making/promoting Yanai-jima and Kuga-Chijimi are amateurs. The significance of implementing SGFWS is that students of design in Finland, Hawaii, and Yamaguchi can use these fabrics, think freely and develop products, and provide fresh ideas.



Picture 3
Indigo dyeing experience with
natural lye fermentation at so-i

For SGFWS2019, we turned our attention to the activities of Tonomi in Hofu City, located on central Yamaguchi’s south coast, which has been promoting revitalization through “making/creating a home for indigo” .” In Hofu City, inspiration has come from Hideko Amemura, a famous dyeing and weaving artist, and the organization she heads, “Ai-to-Ai no Kai” (“the Indigo and Love Association”); since 2015, this has been the trigger for promoting the “Creating an Indigo Town” initiative, and for the promotion of indigo dyeing and indigo cultivation in the Tonomi.

One of the measures taken by Hofu City's regional regeneration was to recruit two people as its “Local Vitalization Cooperator.” Through the “Tonomi Indigo Study Group,” abandoned cultivable land in Tonomi has been regenerated as indigo fields, and the recruits learned traditional dyeing and weaving techniques using the Japanese indigo plant, starting with cultivation and how to build the natural indigo lye fermentation used in dyeing.

In this year's SGFWS2019, we visited “so-i,” an indigo dyeing studio opened by Ryuji Daido after he finished his employment with the Local Vitalization Cooperator. Under his guidance we studied making patterns by squeezing fabric between boards (Picture 3), tried kagozome dyeing, which applies dye through rotating cylinders to create a varied color, and stick dyeing, where fabric is dyed after being tied to a stick. Products made using cloth which we dyed here, plus handmade Japanese paper (illustration 4) from Tokuchi, also in Yamaguchi Prefecture (Picture 4), were unveiled at a fashion show at the Aguri Art Festival 2019 (Picture 5).



Picture 4
Making washi with mulberry at
Tokuchi Washi Studio



Picture 5
SGFWS designs presented at
Aguri Art Festival 2019

After returning to Finland, students from the University of Lapland who participated in SGFWS2017 were inspired by the origami dyeing they learned here, and conducted a dyeing and weaving workshop at the university's Rovaniemi campus. In addition, students who participated in SGFWS2018 held an exhibition inspired by indigo dyeing at Rovaniemi's Arctic Design Week 2019. These examples show that foreign designers who have come into contact with authentic Japanese traditional crafts have developed mechanisms for recreating them in their own culture.

In the age of AI and IOT, it is meaningful for people in Japan and overseas to experience local resources such as genuine techniques and materials unique to a region, to review their own lifestyles and shape creative lives.



Yumino Mizutani

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Mizutani's focus is on regional revitalization and regional product development through clothing design. With her students, she established Naru Naxeve Ltd., whose products include a series of modern clothing inspired by agricultural wear called ® mompekkko.

Mizutani has been leading international collaborative workshops with a team gathered by Marjatta Heikkilä-Rastas since 2009 and has provided the central information on the history and traditions of the textile-producing and fashion areas in Japan.



Web-Sites

japan-insights

<https://topics.japan-insights.jp/#kimonoorigami>