

Outline of The Wajima Collaboration Project

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Taking on the challenge identified by the local community — Wajima Collaboration Project

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1. Introduction

“How does it feel when you’re using *Wajima nuri*? What’s the feeling like?”

Some people may ask why we chose to express the theme of this project by asking this question. Evidently, *Wajima nuri* is second nature to those who partake in it daily, so it is easy for many to overlook this basic question. However, in the midst of rethinking *Wajima nuri*’s standing in our society today, this question emerged from within the local production community itself.

Wajima nuri is not only recognized as a cultural resource, but also as a source of pride for the people living in the Wajima area.

Therefore, the activation of *Wajima nuri* market is related to the activation of the area for the future.

Unlike themes that inform design development, ours does not project glitz and glamour. However, revisiting qualities long considered to be *Wajima nuri*’s strengths and reawakening the “second nature” in our local production community will perhaps have a beneficial effect, not only on the economy, but also on the feelings of producers and marketers. For us, seeking new paths and directions for *Wajima nuri* has been a daunting challenge. Perhaps this project, however small, may serve to light a candle in the darkness (**Figure 1**).

Since its early days, *Wajima nuri* has attracted attention as a Japanese national craft, and its techniques and design are highly sophisticated. Additionally, the current research project confirms the high level of awareness of *Wajima nuri*.



Fig.1 : Research in *Wajima nuri* shop (Kirimoto Shop)

However, difficulties in the *Wajima nuri* industry—from a decline in sales due to economic stagnation since 1992—have hit producers very hard. Due to this, producers and sellers have had to make special efforts to help themselves and to improve the market; design development, in collaboration with well-known designers, has been attempted. While these efforts have led to a temporary stimulus in a part of the market, the development of new objects has not resulted in the sustainable and widespread revitalization of the market as a whole.

Rejuvenation of the *Wajima nuri* market first requires publicity. However, one of the challenges producers have been grappling with over the last 25 years or so is that while the brand name *Wajima nuri* is well known, not many people have actually touched or used it. Some producers have started to recognize the necessity of addressing the fundamental challenge of re-examining the “goodness” of *Wajima nuri* products—which their producers have taken for granted—and of finding

effective ways of conveying that “goodness,” in order to revitalize the *Wajima nuri* industry. However, analysis and examination of this type of challenge requires qualitative rather than quantitative research, and this in turn requires specialist knowledge and skills. It is difficult for the producers to find the money and time needed to undertake such research, and so it has become essential for them to build collaborative relationships with those outside the industry who possess the requisite knowledge and skills.

This is a two-year collaborative project involving the industry, Kanazawa University and the government, to face issue regarding a challenge identified by local producers. Humanities students have taken on a clear challenge set by those engaged in the production of *Wajima nuri*; they have addressed the question of the general perception of *Wajima nuri* by learning about kansei engineering methods and to whom research results should be conveyed, while learning about various marketing methods.

2. Tackling the challenge identified by local producers

Wajima nuri is best characterized by the solid skills behind it. Its brand awareness grew from being designated early on as a traditional craft product, and because of the economic bubble. However, as the bubble burst, product output fell sharply, and this led producers into a state of confusion: taking past changes as precedents, the situation was seen as one of difficulties with some expectation for “recovery.” Obviously, after the bubble burst, Wajima-shi stepped up its efforts to publicize the “knowledge” component of *Wajima nuri*—such as its highly developed skills and implemented projects—to increase sales. Some firms and workshops, which have been making efforts to help themselves, have also engaged with design development professionals to open up new markets, while executing a variety of strategies; they have seen some results. Still, if we look at the



Fig.2 : Joint meeting with Mr. Kirimoto and Ms. Kiromoto



Fig.3 : Field trip in Wajima

Wajima nuri industry as a whole, there has been no significant progress, and the fundamental cause of that stagnation remains unclear. Against this background, some producers have become aware of the need to address fundamental questions as to what the “goodness” of *Wajima nuri* is, and whether this “goodness” is being effectively conveyed. The person who has led this effort is Mr. Kirimoto, a collaborative partner in this project (Figure 2).

The difficulty *Wajima nuri* has is the challenge of differentiating itself from its competitors (e.g. lacquerware from elsewhere, or plastic products) solely by referencing its design. This is because, unlike ceramic, glass, and wooden products, it is very difficult to discern differences among lacquerware solely by appearance. Following this line of thinking, Mr. Kirimoto—who has been using *Wajima nuri* products since childhood—has started to think that what is necessary is engaging in customers kansei (sensitivity) (i.e. what one feels

and has felt) upon using *Wajima nuri* products, which are made by applying natural urushi to natural wood. Furthermore, he believes this is where *Wajima nuri*'s potential “goodness” can be found, and that it can be convincingly conveyed to the customer. However, to take on this challenge, producers need to find the money and time needed to carry out research and analysis, and researching and visualizing people’s kansei is an extremely difficult challenge. Against this background, the “Wajima Collaboration Project” was initiated with a view to rejuvenating the community’s cultural resources, within the Graduate Program in Cultural Resource Management (Figure 3).

3. The Wajima Collaboration Project

In this project, humanities students carried out research, mainly by questionnaire and by collecting people’s “narratives,” using their own knowledge and research skills. At the same time, they introduced “kansei engineering” to analyze research findings; they also examined the challenges identified by the local producers, by learning about marketing methods, in order to set up a marketing process model and identify potential customers (Figure 4,5,6).

There were a total of 40 participants in this project: 12 Japanese students, 18 foreign students, 5 Kanazawa University instructors, 2 instructors from other institutions, and 3 Wajima City partners. In addition, experts were invited to give special lectures on the basics of *Wajima nuri*, including its history.

The research has thus far revealed that when *Wajima nuri* products are used for the first time, the continuation rate is higher than is the case with other products. It also revealed that the act of “touching a *Wajima nuri* product by mouth” is more important than the act of “touching”—something that was focused on when the project started—and that the customer’s willingness to purchase depends on who provides the product information. In other words, to develop a potential customer



Fig.4 : Work shop in system management lecture



Fig.5 : “Searching the value of *Wajima nuri*?”



Fig.6 : Lecture on *Wajima nuri* history

base, the point is whether we can encourage potential customers to bring *Wajima nuri* products to their mouth, in addition to touching them with their hands. It is estimated that once *Wajima nuri* products are used as a part of a customer’s everyday life, the sustainable acquisition of new customers

will become possible. The students identified, from gathering people’s “narratives,” that what is needed is a device by which to convey the attractiveness of a *Wajima nuri* product, even before they “touch” it. They also identified kansei words and narratives people use which have not been attracted much attention so far.

The focus on language as a connector between an object and a potential customer is not unique to the case of *Wajima nuri*. A newspaper article on 27 November 2017(1) reports three recommendations from the “Executive Committee for the Promotion and Education ‘Toward the Next 100 Years of Japanese *Kogei*’.”

- ◇ “polishing the skills needed to ‘convey’ the attractiveness of *kogei*”
- ◇ increasing opportunities for consumers to “feel the goodness” of *kogei*
- ◇ preserving tools and materials that are in danger of disappearing

The article lists the following needs with regards to “polishing the skills needed to ‘convey’ the attractiveness of *kogei*”:

- The need to explain the characteristics of and skills involved in *kogei*, in simple terms;
- The need to accelerate the drafting of common translation rules;
- The need to develop human resources who can talk about the community’s own culture, and who can explain the values on behalf of the producers.

What is sought here are “language” and “narratives (stories).” This is because, for those objects whose “goodness” cannot be conveyed solely through “appearance” in a photo or on the Internet, language plays an important role in mediating between people and the object.

The project focused on analysis of the students’ research findings and on making proposals, with a

view to revitalizing the market. It has not reached the stage where these proposals are being brought forth in the actual market, as further challenges are being identified and re-examinations of market revitalization are being undertaken. This is something we deeply regret. Nonetheless, the project has tackled the question “What do people feel when they use *Wajima nuri* products?”—a question which the *Wajima nuri* producers, who had been implementing many design development projects in order to develop a new market, have not been able to address; the question represents efforts to solve the problem by deriving analytical results. Additionally, to whom the results should be conveyed is another question with which producers have been grappling, and the project has clarified both who and where potential customers are; it has also proposed some ideas for promoting *Wajima nuri*. This information will be used by the producers to publicize the product in the market.

At the beginning of the project, we felt rather intimidated by *Wajima nuri* and its high-class image. However, our perception of this image started to transform as we listened to the producers’ passionate “narratives” and used the product ourselves. Once the “goodness” of the project is conveyed, and once the product is used, the number of product “fans” will increase—precisely because the quality of the product is high, and *Wajima nuri* has high potential in this regard. We sincerely hope that our students’ research findings will lead to the successful communication of the “goodness” of *Wajima nuri*, and that their work contributes to the future revitalization of the *Wajima nuri* product market, even in some small way.

Notes

- (1) Hokkoku Shimbun, November 27, 2017, No. 44826, the Ishikawa version, page 1

【Members】

<p>◆ Participants: ▶ Within Kanazawa University</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Graduate Program in Cultural Resource Management: All students · Graduate Program in Cultural Resource Management: Specially-appointed professors <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Professor: Yamagata, Mariko (Incumbent : Okayama University of Science Professor) Associate Professor: Qin, Xiaoli Associate Professor: Yoshida, Yasuyuki Assistant Professor: Tamura, Ulara (Incumbent : Kanazawa University Associate Professor) Assistant Professor: Matsumura, Eri · Organization of Frontier Science and Innovation (O-FSI): Assistant Professor Toriya, Masako (Incumbent : Graduate School of System Design Management Project in Keio University Senior assistant professor)
<p>◆ Participants: ▶ Outside of Kanazawa University</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Japan Advanced Institute of Science and Technology: Professor Emeritus Nakamori, Yoshiteru · Wajima Lacquerware Production Company: Wajima Kirimoto (Mr. Kirimoto, Taichi, Kirimoto, Junko) · Lacquerware Commerce and Industry Division in the Industrial section of Wajima City Hall (Mr.Hosokawa, Hidekuni)

【Outline of Lectures and meetings】

2016/ 5/11	Lecture: "Kansei Data Analysis-But computing with Word- 1. Bipolar Evaluation Measures" by Prof. Yoshiteru Nakamori
2016/ 5/18	Lecture: "Kansei Data Analysis-But computing with Word- 2. Approach to Design Support" by Prof. Yoshiteru Nakamori
2016/ 5/25	Lecture: "Kansei Data Analysis-But computing with Word- 3. Product Recommendation" by Prof. Yoshiteru Nakamori
2016/ 7/12	Lecture:"Knowledge Management using Kansei Data Analysis" by Prof. Yoshiteru Nakamori
2016/ 6/ 3	Lecture: "Sensory Inspection and Kansei Engineering" by Koetsu Yamazaki as the president of Kanazawa University
2016/ 6/22	Joint meeting with Mr. Taichi Kirimoto and Ms. Junko Kirimoto
2016/ 7/ 6	The meeting to request the budget advised by Prof. Masako Toriya
2016/ 7/29	The special lecture on marketing theory and system management theory 1 by Prof. Masako Toriya
2016/10/31	The preliminary research in Wajima city as Cultural resource studies internship
2016/12/ 5	The special lecture on marketing theory and system management theory 2 by Prof. Masako Toriya
2017/ 3/14	Lecture: "How to educate innovators" in Kyoto Institute of Technology by Päivi Oinonen (Design Factory Global Network Strategist, Aalto University)
2017/ 3/15 -16	KYOTO Design Lab Innovation Culture Workshop in Kyoto Institute of Technology by Päivi Oinonen (Design Factory Global Network Strategist, Aalto University) by Kasper Suomalainen (Director of Community, Start up Sauna)
2017/ 5/23	Lecture:"A whole concept of the <i>Wajima nuri</i> project" by Prof. Masako Toriya
2017/ 6/30	Midterm presentation by group A,B,C
2017/ 8/8-9	Field trip in Wajima city as Cultural resource studies internship
2017/12/18	Lecture:"The Value Proposition Canvas" by Prof. Masako Toriya
2017/ 6/28	Lecture on the history of <i>Wajima nuri</i> 1 by Mr. Minoru Omukai※
2017/ 8/ 7	Lecture on the history of <i>Wajima nuri</i> 2 by Mr. Minoru Omukai※
2017/ 1/19	Presentation on summary by group A,B,C

※Former executive director of the Wajima Lacquerware Commerce and Industry Association