

## Toyooka Kaban ---Meticulous Bag Making and Regional Brand Strategy---



Toyooka Kaban KITTE Marunouchi Store (flagship store)

Large logo at store entrance

The KITTE commercial building, which is located in front of the Marunouchi South Exit of Tokyo Station, houses many shops selling products that exude a feeling of Japan's devotion to craftsmanship and the distinctive aesthetic of the Japanese, as well as restaurants offering time-honored favorites from the regions. One of the shops is Toyooka Kaban (Toyooka Bags), which is situated on the first floor of a spacious atrium rising to the sixth floor. The large logo of Toyooka Kaban, white walls, and high ceiling are most impressive. Bright sunlight pours in through the window at the back of the shop, which offers a heartwarming view of the red bricks of Tokyo Station. The white walls are lined with colorful bags, each one of them proclaiming a rich uniqueness. It is here that 12 companies certified to use the Toyooka Kaban brand display their suggestions, from



business bags to casual bags.

A bag-loving friend told me about Toyooka bags, and a little research showed that Toyooka in Hyogo Prefecture is indeed the top bag-producing city in Japan in terms of both production quantity and shipment value, as well as the number of workers. Why did Toyooka become such a leading bag-producing district? First, let's look at its history to find the reason.

**Wicker trunk made from branches of the willow tree**

### Bag-Making History and Brand Strategy

Going back more than 1,000 years in history, a wicker box (*yanagi-bako*<sup>1</sup>) made in Tajima (the northern part of Hyogo Prefecture, including present-day Toyooka), used as a receptacle when making offerings to the gods, was stored in the Shosoin treasure house at Todaiji temple



in Nara during the Nara period (710–794) and is still preserved there. Since *koriyana* willow trees grew in the Tajima area, willow craft developed there. In the Edo period (1603–1868) especially, *yanagi-gori*<sup>2</sup> (wicker trunks made from branches of the willow tree) became a monopoly of the Toyooka domain, and production flourished.

At the beginning of the twentieth century the production of bags developed, and Toyooka-made fiber bags<sup>3</sup> were used by Japanese athletes at the Berlin Olympics in 1936. After



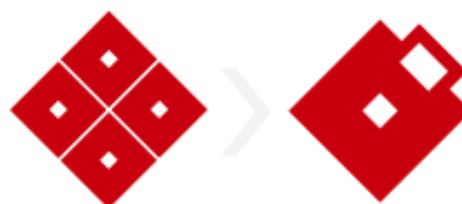
**Fiber bag**

World War II new materials, such as polyvinyl chloride (PVC) leather, and techniques to prevent shape loss were developed, and light yet sturdy bags became popular. As a result, sales soared. The number of bag companies in Toyooka exceeded 300, and the city was the national number one in terms of production quantity.

After that, despite the Toyooka bag industry's long history of development, original equipment manufacturing (OEM<sup>4</sup>) became mainstream, and the name of Toyooka as the producing region disappeared. Furthermore, in the 1990s the shrinking of the market caused by the collapse of the bubble economy and surge of imported goods from China and elsewhere led to a sharp fall in the number of members of the Hyogo Prefecture Bag Industry Association.

Faced with a prolonged period of stagnation, the association began the branding of Toyooka bags in 2006 to achieve wider recognition nationwide, better sales, and vitalization of the regional economy, with the Toyooka Kaban brand receiving certification from the Japan Patent Office as a regional brand. The brand concept is “For consumers to feel reassured in using our superior bags, which are the result of our long history of manufacture and craftsmanship nurtured in Toyooka.” Even among Toyooka-made bags, only products made by companies meeting standards stipulated by the Hyogo Prefecture Bag Industry Association and passing evaluation tests are certified to use the Toyooka Kaban brand. Product evaluation tests are conducted by the Toyooka Kaban Regional Brand Committee.

The Toyooka Kaban logo design features one diamond from the four-diamond family crest of the Kyogoku clan, which ruled the Tajima-Toyooka domain in the Edo period, together with a bag handle. The Kyogoku clan encouraged the production of wicker trunks, which were the roots of Toyooka’s bag industry.



**The family crest and the logo**

1. A lidded wicker box woven from thin willow branches
2. A box-shaped trunk for carrying luggage woven from the branches of the willow tree
3. A bag made from soluble wood pulp pressed at high pressure to enhance fiber density
4. The manufacture of products sold under the brand name of the ordering party

## **Focus on Bags**

### **(Techniques and Products of Toyooka Kaban Certified Companies)**

I talked to four company presidents of bag makers leading the Toyooka Kaban regional brand.

#### **Yuri Corporation**

First of all, I visited President Shozaburo Yuri of Yuri Corporation, founded 55 years ago (as of 2019) and one of the largest bag makers in Toyooka with 220 employees. Yuri Corporation has four in-house brands to cater to the different types of distribution---namely, department stores nationwide, stores in Toyooka, online shopping, and products



made at its factory in Vietnam for sale in Japan. Its factory in Vietnam has a history of 30 years.

Yuri Corporation uses computerized sewing machines, computer-aided design (CAD),<sup>5</sup> and computer-aided manufacturing (CAM)<sup>5</sup> to guarantee accurate and highly efficient bag manufacturing. Multiple-type and large-volume production is possible, President Yuri told me, but the company devotes most effort to the accuracy of testing. Products go through two rigorous in-house checks, so its rate of defects pointed out by customers is on a par with Louis Vuitton at 0.06%.

The company is especially confident in its New Dulles series, which boasts bags with an impressive large opening and streamlined form. Dulles bags<sup>6</sup> have a rather pompous image, but the backpack design has given them a new look. Based on the concept of “turning functionality into style,” the bags have a beautiful form that belies their large capacity (enough to take three large PET bottles). Even when their three-dimensional form is lost, these outstanding bags soon return to their original shape.



**The New Dulles series of bags with their impressive streamlined form**

5. The use of computers for design and processing (or cutting in the case of bags)

6. This briefcase with a large opening and clasp is generally called a doctor’s bag, but after World War II US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles liked to carry one. A Japanese bag maker adopted the name “Dulles bag” for its own product, and the term caught on.

### **Masumi Hono Co., Ltd.**

Next I had a talk with President Kenji Uemura of Masumi Hono Co., Ltd., which was founded 103 years ago and has 19 employees. Masumi Hono is one of the most venerable of Toyooka's bag makers. Having started with the manufacture of wicker trunks, it now makes mainly high-class and basically made-to-order box products, such as trunks. In the historical drama *Idaten*, which aired on NHK's television in 2019, there is a part



where, at the time of the Tokyo Olympics in 1964, the Olympic torch relay starts from four different places and comes together in Tokyo. It was Masumi Hono that made the special trunks to carry pilot lights of the Olympic flame to the starting points of the four courses.

### **The special trunks used to carry the Olympic torch pilot lights**

Since production is made-to-order, everything is done according to the wishes of the customer, from the size of the bag or trunk and functionality to the type of leather, color of the leather and thread, and stitching. As derivatives from large trunks, the company also makes chests, desks, and chairs. "We are the only bag maker in Toyooka with a carpentry division!" laughed President Uemura.



Visiting the workshop and looking around, in stark contrast to Masumi Hono's venerable image, I was surprised to see many young artisans. The average age apparently is 38



years. Since Masumi Hono makes a range of products on a made-to-order basis, from small items like purses to large boxes and furniture, young people, I was told, join the company wanting to learn everything about bag making from A to Z.

### **The contract room**

Because Masumi Hono's business involves mostly deluxe made-to-order products, at the time of concluding the final contract, customers are shown into the so-called contract room, which is actually a renovated old warehouse. There the two parties conclude the contract, surrounded by colorful leather adorning the walls and famous historical products made by the firm. Photographs must be taken from outside the door. Only customers concluding contracts can step inside.

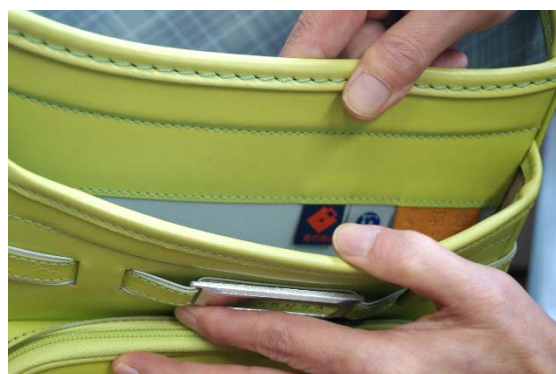
### **Hakura Co., Ltd.**

Next I interviewed President Yoshinori Hakura of Hakura Co., Ltd., which specializes in school satchels. The company was founded 56 years ago and has 23 workers. For a long time it made golf bags and other bags for other company brands. For example, it had an OEM agreement with a certain famous golf equipment company. But then in 2016 Hakura decided to specialize in elementary school satchels, and since 2017 it has been focusing on the manufacture of original satchels.

### **Colorful and original satchels**



When I asked President Hakura why they had decided to specialize in original satchels, he gave me two reasons. First, manufacturing under OEM agreements was not very stimulating. Second, satchel production gave them the opportunity to utilize the know-how they had gained in making golf bags, which had been their forte. As of 2019, they were accepting orders for and selling satchels with a variation of 40 colors both through their stores and online. The made-to-order sales, he said, give rise to higher motivation, because the company knows exactly who they are manufacturing for. In addition, all Hakura satchels are certified Toyooka Kaban brand products. The company's aim is to increase the color variation to 140 types in 2020.



**The embroidered logo shows that the satchel is a certified Toyooka Kaban brand product.**

When I asked what the company was particularly meticulous about, President Hakura pointed to the satchel flaps and said, "The rivet-less flaps." Other satchels have two





rivets fixing the part linking the flap and clasp. To bring out the beauty of the leather, Hakura developed a technique that does not use rivets but nevertheless maintains strength. In addition, if the customer so wishes, Hakura decorates the beautiful rivet-less flap with stitch art. This is one added value of Hakura's satchels.

#### **Rivet-less flap and stitch art**

#### **Adachi Co., Ltd.**

As my final company visit, I met with Mr. Tetsuhiro Adachi, the third president of Adachi Co., Ltd., which was established 77 years ago and has 19 employees. Originally this company was engaged in the wholesale of parts and materials used in bag making. It is also a distributor for YKK Corporation. But about 15 years ago it also began the manufacture of bags. From the start, President Adachi told me, in consideration of other firms in the bag industry to which it was selling materials wholesale, the company opened completely new sales routes and concentrated on fields and products that others had not explored. This approach was successful, and now they produce not only ordinary bags but also specially ordered cases for kimonos, electronic equipment, medical devices, and the like.

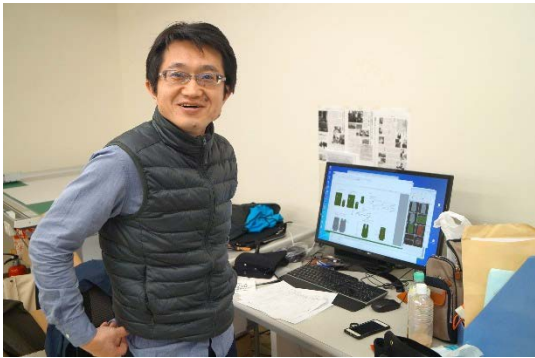


**(Above) Collaborative product with Sabae Megane**

**(Below) Collaborative product with Ibara Denim**

Adachi has been positively participating in activities ever since the Toyooka Kaban brand was launched, and it is also channeling efforts toward collaborative projects with brands in other industries, such as Sabae Megane (Fukui Optical Association) and Ibara Denim (Ibara Clothing Cooperative).

Furthermore, the company is closely involved in the Toyooka KABAN Artisan School (see below) and Bag Sewist Training Center (see below) and has hired many graduates from them. Mr. Naoki Yura, who currently plays a central role in the utilization of information technology and product planning at Adachi, is a graduate from the inaugural class of the Toyooka KABAN Artisan School.



**Mr. Naoki Yura, who is in charge of product planning at Adachi Co., Ltd.**

## Passing on Technology and Human Resource Development

### 1F shop at Toyooka KABAN Artisan Avenue

#### Toyooka KABAN Artisan School

On my visit to Toyooka KABAN Artisan School, I was shown around by its manager, Mr. Yoshiaki Kamitani. This school is a vocational college for training bag experts run by Toyooka Machizukuri Co., Ltd.,<sup>7</sup> where Mr. Kamitani works. It is located inside Toyooka KABAN Artisan Avenue, a shop that sells Toyooka Kaban and Toyooka-made bags and is operated by the same company.



#### Showing off their own original bags



When Toyooka KABAN Artisan Avenue was opened in 2014, Toyooka KABAN Artisan School was established on the third floor of the same building as a one-year vocational college to train next-generation bag artisans. At the school, students learn the skills necessary for bag making, such as sketching, cutting, sewing, and CAD, and also acquire knowledge relating to management, such as cost accounting. The concept of the school is that individuals should be able to do everything themselves, from drawing rough sketches to



making the bag. The rule of thumb is that even when students are given a theme for a production assignment, they must add functions and alter the design themselves. By doing so, they master the powers of imagination and thoughtfulness required in the making of original brand products.

Applicants are interviewed from September to October every year, and successful



students spend a year from the following April thoroughly absorbed in bags. Most of the applicants are from outside the prefecture and have a deep interest in craftsmanship. Since they must pay not only tuition fees but also removal and living expenses, I was told, not many students enter the school with a frivolous air.

**Even bags with the same theme all have different designs and sizes.**

I was allowed to observe a class of fiscal 2019 students. Shelves in the classroom were crowded with the students' works. Even though they were the same types of bag, they had completely different designs and sizes. I asked two students from outside the prefecture why they had chosen this school. Both replied that they were interested in artisanship and loved leather. And in both cases, their previous jobs had been in other industries and quite unrelated to artisanship. In the five classes from 2014 to 2018, 30 out of 43 graduates (69.8%) found work at bag makers in Toyooka.

**7. Company established with capital from Toyooka City, Toyooka Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the local shopping district, and others**

### **Bag Sewist Training Center**

The Bag Sewist Training Center operates a short-term intensive program to train bag sewing artisans; it is run by the Toyooka K-Site<sup>8</sup> limited liability company. Even if rationalization and automation advance, it is people who make bags. In particular, I was told, it is difficult to acquire sewing skills for making bags using sewing machines and a variety of materials, such as leather and canvas. The aim of the training center is to train bag sewing artisans who can immediately go to work on the shop floor after four months. Focusing on bag sewing, the trainees intensively study basic and applied techniques that are useful on the shop floor, as well as necessary techniques and work attitudes from a shop-floor perspective, in surroundings closely resembling an actual

work environment.

After completing the training, many of the graduates find work as sewists in the companies participating in this project. A total of 105 trainees completed the course from fiscal 2013 to fiscal 2018, of whom 91 persons (86.6%) found work locally.

#### 8. A limited liability company set up by companies affiliated with the Hyogo Prefecture Bag Industry Association



**A class at the Bag Sewist Training Center**

### Post-Visit Reflections

I visited and observed companies and training institutes playing a central role in the Toyooka Kaban brand strategy and human resource development. What impressed me most was that while each company has its own distinctive commitments in bag making, they also have solid cooperative relations transcending the corporate framework for measures relating to the promotion of brand strategy, “antenna shop” development, training of artisans, and so on. The abovementioned antenna shop in KITTE is operated with capital from the 16 certified Toyooka Kaban companies. I was surprised to hear that this project is not subsidized at all. The Toyooka KABAN Artisan School and Bag Sewist Training Center do receive subsidies, but I don’t think they would be possible without the cooperation of the Toyooka Kaban companies. To use the term selected as the most memorable buzzword of 2019 in Japan, I felt that they do indeed make up “one team.” I came away from my visit in a very exhilarated mood.

Moreover, the circle of cooperative ties is widening to include other regional brands, such as the collaboration in 2017 with Ibara Denim in Okayama Prefecture (the “home of denim”), the first maker of domestic denim in Japan, and in 2018 with Sabae Megane in Fukui Prefecture, which makes good-quality glasses and is well-known worldwide as well.

When I visited Yuri Corporation President Yuri, who is also vice-president of the Hyogo Prefecture Bag Industry Association, I asked about his future ambitions. President Yuri replied that he wanted to further expand the product lineup for ladies and to develop new products using high-quality, water-repellant Italian leather. But his eyes sparkled most when he talked about exhibiting at the Mipel the Bag Show, the largest bag industry trade fair in the world to be held in Milan in February 2020. “I am looking forward to exhibiting at Mipel,” he said, “and impressing European buyers that made-in-Japan bags and Toyooka Kaban are synonymous.” At that moment, I sensed President Yuri’s global strategy.

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