

Our Special Guides for Foreign Dignitaries Delve a Little Deeper into Japan's Attractions!

Tenugui: Japan's Age-Old Wisdom in Daily Life

—The attractions of *chusen* texture—



What scenes spring to mind when you think of *tenugui*? There are many. Those dashing people shouldering a heavy *mikoshi* (portable shrine) at a shrine festival, with *tenugui* tied around their heads. A comic *rakugo* storyteller pulling out a *tenugui* and using it in every way imaginable. A public bathhouse in an *ukiyo-e* print. A woman with a Japanese hairdo, a *tenugui* wrapped in a distinctive style around her head. A carpenter with a *tenugui* hanging from his waist, or a gardener with one round his head, or a farmer with one round his neck. A handy prop in Japanese dance, or a scene in a *sewamono* (domestic play) in *kabuki*. *Kendo* fencers putting on *tenugui* under their protective headgear. And more. *Tenugui* appear in a host of settings. They are truly an all-purpose treasure.

Recently I visited Somekoba Nijiyura, the Tokyo branch of Nakani Co., Ltd., which has its headquarters in Sakai, Osaka Prefecture, and produces the *Chusen Tenugui Nijiyura* brand. There I was able to speak with the branch manager, Mr. Keisuke Tanaka.

Mr. Keisuke Tanaka ⇒



History of *tenugui*

One theory claims that *tenugui* were wrapped around the necks of *haniwa* sculptures, clay figures that were buried with the dead in the *Kofun* period (c. 300–538). Certainly, during the *Nara* period (710–794), about 1,300 years ago, they were used as personal ornaments in special sacred events. Bleached cotton was very expensive at that time, so pieces of silk left over after making *kimono* were used as *tenugui*. In today's money, one piece cost about 35,000 yen. In the *Kamakura* period (1185–1333) samurai came to wear *tenugui* under their helmets. It was in the sixteenth century, around the time of the warlord *Toyotomi Hideyoshi* (1537–98), that cotton *tenugui* gradually came into use and the cultivation of raw cotton began to flourish.

Come the *Edo* period (1603–1868), *tenugui* began to spread among the general populace as a fashion item, such as a sunshade, head covering, bellyband, bandage, or sign. The shogunate issued many sumptuary orders in the *Edo* period, and *tenugui* came to be made from not silk but cotton *kimono* leftovers. *Edo* is said to have been an extremely environment-friendly town, and *tenugui* certainly played their part.

Characteristics of tenugui

Plain-weave *wazarashi*, a traditional Japanese type of bleached cotton cloth in which the warp and weft threads are simply woven alternately, is rectangular and has good water repellency, dries quickly, and maintains cleanliness. It was an essential fabric in the hot and humid Japanese summer. Moreover, as well as being light and cheap, it has the softness, gentleness, and delicacy characteristic of Japan and enables users to enjoy colorful designs and seasonality.

There is a saying that cotton has a long life. Well, a cotton tenugui can be used for a long time for all kinds of purposes---decorating, wrapping, laying, wiping, and finally as a duster or rag. There is also the phrase “cultivating your own tenugui.” The more you use and wash a tenugui, the softer and smoother it becomes, so you can enjoy the process of it becoming familiar and growing into your own personal cloth. Nowadays there is an abundance of designs, so you can enjoy tenugui in accordance with seasonal events. They make ideal presents too, and recently tenugui have become popular as souvenirs among foreigners visiting Japan.



New Year



Doll Festival



Children's Day



Spring



Summer

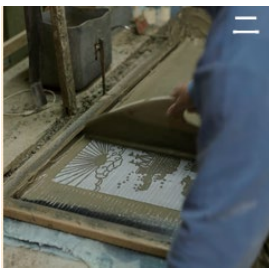
What is *chusen*?

As the Japanese characters of the name suggest, *chusen* is a technique of hand-dyeing by pouring in the dye. In the Meiji period (1868–1912), a technique developed in Osaka whereby 50 pieces of cloth could be dyed in one go. The special feature of this technique is that because each cloth is hand-dyed twice, with the front and back lined up in a concertina shape, both front and back are well colored. Furthermore, there are many processes involved in *chusen*, and they are all done by artisans by hand, so no two items come out the same. The main attraction of *chusen* is its delicate and gentle gradation and diffusion. The more you look at them, the more Nijiyura tenugui attract you. And the more you use them, the more familiar and personal they become. (The name Nijiyura comes from the fabric's diffusion [*nijimi* in Japanese] and fluctuation [*yuragi*].)

Processes

(1) Laying the paste

A stencil is fixed over the fabric, and a resist paste is spread evenly through this stencil using a wooden spatula. This paste ensures that dye will not seep into unwanted parts. When one portion of cloth is finished, it is lifted, and the same process is conducted on the next portion. Paste is applied to all portions, one at a time, over a stencil containing the outlines of patterns. The process is repeated about 25 times. The laying of paste in this way is a very important process that exerts the most impact on subsequent dyeing. The paste is made from natural materials, the main one being seaweed.



Paste laying



Repeated paste laying



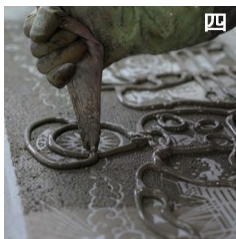
Wooden spatula



Stencil

(2) Pouring the dye

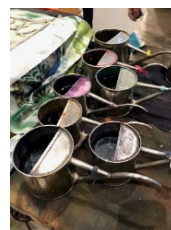
The pasted and folded cloth is placed on a dyeing stand, and masking barriers are created around the patterns so that dye does not leak out. Thus, it is possible to apply one or multiple colors to each design. Dye of the chosen color is poured into the bordered areas using a long-spouted dye pot called a *dohin*. The dye is sucked in by means of a suction machine installed in the dyeing stand so that the dye penetrates equally and efficiently. This method allows each individual thread to be dyed without damaging the fabric, so its soft feel can be preserved. After one round of dyeing is finished, the overlapping cloth is reversed, and the same process is repeated for the other side. Since the dye is poured from above and sucked in from below, it penetrates the cloth in such a way that there is no front or back.



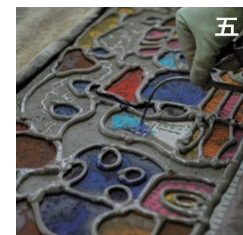
Making masking
barriers with paste



Gadget to squeeze
out the paste



Dye pots



Pouring the dye

(3) Washing with water

When the dyeing is finished, the cloth is washed in a long tub called a “river” to remove the resist paste and unwanted dye. The washing is done quickly so that there is no color bleeding.

(4) Drying

After sufficient washing, the cloth is dewatered and then dried in a sunny room with a high ceiling so that there is no discoloration. Then, after sufficient drying, the cloth is cut.



Drying ⇒

Participation in a “Tenugui Day” event



Wrapping with a tenugui



Tenugui exercises



Tenugui dyeing experience



In an event space near the branch store in the COREDO Muromachi Terrace shopping and entertainment complex in Nihonbashi, there was a display of representative tenugui with very pleasing diffusion and fluctuation, which are the origin of the brand name Nijiyura, as well as demonstrations of how tenugui can be used. I was also delighted to hear some really interesting things about tenugui from Mr. Yuji Nakao, the representative director of Nakani.

Mr. Nakao, who worked for Panasonic before becoming the second-generation president of Nakani, launched the company’s Nijiyura brand with the hope that as many people as possible would come into close contact with tenugui and “cultivate” their own personal towels. He also wanted to continue the traditional technique of *chusen* dyeing and pass on the artisanship to the next generation. Based on this mission, in 2016 Mr. Nakao designated March 21 as “Tenugui Day,” and in 2017 he conceived the idea of “tenugui exercises.” In 2019 Mr. Nakao himself was certified as a traditional craftsman of Japan.

The attraction of *chusen* dyeing lies in a texture that is not produced by prints. A close look gives a good sense of the color diffusion. Indeed, the diffusion and gradation techniques are so appealing, even the Museum of Modern Arts in New York came over to make a purchase. In the processes involved in tenugui dyeing, the laying of paste is the most difficult task and the one where artisans must demonstrate their skill. It is important not to ruin the patterns. Adjustment of the dye diffusion at the time of suction after the dye has been poured in will bring out the texture. About 40 people participated in the “Tenugui Day” event, splitting up into groups for a *chusen* tenugui-making experience.

Development of *chusen* tenugui

In accordance with the desire to have as many people as possible come into contact with tenugui and the mission of protecting the technique and artisanship, the Nijiyura brand organizes various projects. Shortening the size of conventional tenugui, it has produced a 60 cm long size for use in wrapping lunch boxes, creating decorations that do not take up much space, and so on. As well as seasonal motifs, designs are being created through collaboration with various companies too. In addition, orders are received from individuals who, for example, want to make tenugui celebrating their sixtieth birthday for distribution to their friends. They have the advantage of being light and easy to send. Another major feature of Nijiyura is that visitors can actual experience the *chusen* technique in its store.



JR



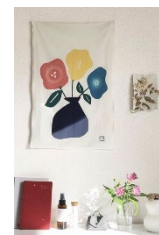
Beatles



Jinbei summer clothing



Fan



60 cm size

Chusen experience

This time I had my first-ever *chusen* experience at Somekoba Nijiyura and was honored to receive instruction from Mr. Nakao, who was visiting Tokyo for “Tenugui Day.”

First, I practiced the process of making masking barriers of paste around the patterns. It was necessary to learn how to hold and squeeze out the paste. In particular, I was surprised how important it is to stand firmly on your legs. (Mr. Nakao warned me that I would have muscle pain later. Lo and behold, two days later my leg muscles were

aching!) The gadget was rather like the one used for squeezing out cake cream, but the paste was much thicker than I had imagined, and applying the right degree of force was difficult.

They had prepared cloth, piled up in a concertina shape and enough for about 10 tenugui, on the dyeing stand. Paste had already been laid on this cloth. (The paste-laying process had been carried out beforehand by artisans at the Sakai factory, and the cloth was then very carefully transported to the Tokyo studio.) I surrounded the patterns of the design, especially prepared this time for “Tenugui Day,” with paste barriers, taking care to maintain a certain height so that the dye would not spill over and to properly arrange the adhesive side of the barrier’s edge. If a pattern is divided in half by a barrier, it is possible to pour dyes of two colors into a single pattern without breaking it. Apparently the best way is to squeeze out the paste cautiously yet boldly. I corralled more than 10 patterns with barriers.



Dyeing table and dye pot for the experience

Mr. Nakao's instruction

Paste barriers

The next step was to pour in the dye. I learned how to hold the metal dye pots, which contained dyes of about 10 colors, and how to select the patterns starting with deep colors and pour the dye inside the barriers. The hands-on experience really did put me on tenterhooks. It was difficult trying to figure out how to use the vessels and how to make slight pressure adjustments to get just the right amount of dye. Even though I was careful, there were times when dye ran into a neighboring pattern and the colors mixed. This led to bleeding, and, to my amazement, an unexpected color would appear. There is a technique for producing a certain hue by pouring one color on top of another, but in my case I had mixed the colors quite artlessly. I panicked, but Mr. Nakao laughingly reassured me by saying that this was one of the attractions of *chusen* dyeing.

After a dye is poured in, the suction machine installed under the dyeing stand sucks the dye down and soaks it into the cloth below, ensuring that the dye does not amount to

more than necessary. This suction is modifiable, and apparently professional artisans have the knack of creating texture through the timing of suction.



Pouring the dye

After pouring in all the dyes, finally I applied a liquid to the whole cloth to fix the colors and waited a while. Eventually the time came to remove the protective fabric at the top. My heart was pounding at this moment. But then, to my delight, a vivid tenugui design appeared. And when I lifted the cloth, the same design appeared again and again. Magic! I was so pleased to have made my very own tenugui.



Finished!



Video of final process: <https://youtube.com/shorts/aa4SSCcn3kE>

They put the long tenugui cloth, still covered in paste, in a plastic bag for me. After arriving back home, I washed off the paste with water. The paste is a natural material, so it can be easily washed off at home with tap water. As I washed the cloth, I was lost for words in my excitement. Washing completed, I squeezed the cloth and rolled it out for drying. As I hung it on a pole, I felt just like an artisan myself. After drying, I clipped the cloth a little with scissors and then gracefully tore off one tenugui portion by hand. Looking at my very own tenugui, I felt rather proud of myself.

Since this experience of making tenugui, my appreciation of tenugui has changed. Now I look more closely at each one. Where and how did the artisan make barriers for this tenugui? How did they choose the dyes? The gradation technique on this one is marvelous. What a difficult design! Hats off to the artisan's skill in laying the paste

without destroying the patterns! I think Mr. Nakao's attempt to get people, through the tenugui-making experience, to realize the attractions of tenugui and reconsider their merits has been a huge success. I can well understand the feelings of people who want to repeat the trial and do better next time. Apparently many foreigners wish to participate as well.

According to Mr. Nakao, *chusen* dyeing produces a unique texture, but it is tricky. With several layers of cloth overlapping front and back, inevitably the colors are going to bleed. Mr. Nakao himself has had the experience of dyeing cloth in response to a product order, only to find that the number of finished items was insufficient. Very hastily he had to continue the processes from paste laying to drying in order to make the delivery on time.

Recently, Mr. Nakao added, the number of women artisans has been increasing too. He commented that he wants to further improve the production setup and continue the traditional technique.

Present-day tenugui

In addition to the beauty and seasonality of designs, it is hoped that people recognize again the original merits of tenugui and make use of this uniquely Japanese wisdom to help achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In particular, tenugui are light and quick-drying, and they can be torn into necessary sizes by hand, so they are extremely useful in preparation for disasters. They can also be used to make masks without any need for sewing. So from now on, when you go out, by all means put a tenugui in your bag. It is very soothing as well to carry around a tenugui of your liking.



Unsewn masks



Tenugui exercises (Please find a tenugui in your house.) Once you try these exercises, I guarantee you will be hooked!

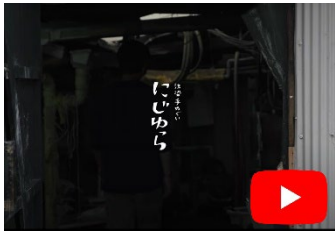
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