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Fuji-Yoshida - Weaving Town

Japan is rich in regional textile history and despite relative decline in recent decades numerous centres of production remain. One such example is Fuji-Yoshida, located at the northern base of Mount Fuji in Yamanashi Prefecture, west of Tokyo.

Although the wider region is known for its excellent tree and vine fruit crops, the area also has a textile history spanning several hundred years. This was chiefly established through the development of *Kaiki*, a fine, high-density plain weave silk fabric used as a lining cloth for haori (kimono jackets) and kimono. Kaiki first emerged in the late 17th century as an attempt to establish a distinctive place in a market already dominated by *Yuki* and *Hachioji* silks, much traded in fashionable Tokyo, the other side of the high surrounding mountains. The innovation in kaiki was both material and cultural, as apart from high standards of silk raising, throwing, and weaving, production employed sophisticated dyed and printed warp and weft patterning techniques. The results included not only decorative, but also subtly subversive and coded designs in the tradition of *iki*, a discrete reaction to sumptuary edicts of the Edo period (1600-1868).

With plentiful fresh water from the slopes of Mount Fuji, and modern connectivity, the local cloth industry has not only survived but continues to flourish. Today local techniques include plain and figured jacquard and dobby (shaft) weaving of fine silks, polyesters and cupra, linen and ramie, cotton, cashmere and wool; chambray, float, cut, and double-faced fabrics. Finishing processes include needle-punching, raising, coating and treatment shrinkage. As is common in Japan, there is a careful balance of friendly competition and creative collaboration, and technological innovation has kept apace with national and international developments.

Makita Shoten is best known for its market-leading umbrellas and fine fabrics. First established in 1866 to weave kimono silks, the company began with the wholesale production of kaiki, securing important national recognition and awards. From the 1980s significant technological development (particularly in the use of digitised jacquard weaving and installation of the newest looms), allowed Makita to establish its first modern factory and this has served leading brands from broader markets.

Funakubo Orimono is also one of a few umbrella fabric specialists in the area. Here though, four generations, and over 100 years of history, have seen strategic preservation and gentle adaptation of traditional warp patterning and weaving skills. The *hogushi-ori* technique - where loosely woven warps are hand-printed before setting in the loom for re-weaving, facilitating richly coloured and textured imagery - are a mainstay of production. The business model is typical of such enterprises and relies on close collaboration with other specialist producers, in particular the highly skilled silk screen-printing of warps by the Hirose family, whose workshop is just a short-walk away.

Fine-cloth weaving is the specialism of Watanui Orimono, where chiefly high-end fashion fabrics are produced for a variety of international clients. Like many of its contemporaries the company has pragmatically blended old and new technologies to deliver both trend-facing and trend-setting textiles, pioneering ultra fine weight fabrics in an array of qualities and character. The incumbent generation of three siblings, and their small team of expert weavers, have come together to carefully modernise the business.

Tenjin.Co.Ltd. is a weaver of linen, and cotton, ramie and linen blends. Whilst perhaps relatively low-tech fabrics, production is distinct for its sensitive and sophisticated handling of these noble fibres. Traditional shuttle weaving also makes for cloth with true woven selvages. The raw product of flax and spinning of linen thread is not a national industry, and so yarn is carefully sourced from elsewhere, namely Europe. Natural tones and contemporary takes on traditional patterning techniques like colour-and-weave, and gentle structural play, make for a broad portfolio of cloth, expertly finished by local specialists and made into textile products both in-house and through outsourced production.

Regional government is keen to see local industry sustained and developed hence the local research institute, Yamanashi Prefectural Fuji Industrial Technology Centre. This works to foster opportunity for new products and collaboration, including that with educational institutions like Tokyo Zokei University. Collaboration here has seen both successful innovation and the beginnings of new careers for young designers and thinkers. The centre also houses a rich archive of textile samples representing the material history on which everything is founded. Recently, working with the Yamanashi Weavers Association, it has sought to extend the message to the broader community with the 'Weaving Town' project, ensuring increasing local and national recognition and appreciation of the rich textile network it represents.

Building on its history, specialisms, and working in close respectful harmony, the weaving town of Fuji-Yoshida is set to boast a wealth of market leaders for generations to come.