

**Bruce A. Hironaka**

August 19, 1986

Mrs. T. Takahashi  
Antique Showcase  
215-15th Street  
San Francisco, California 94103

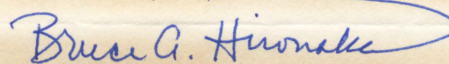
Dear Mrs. Takahashi:

I just wanted to thank you again for taking the time yesterday to speak with me about my genealogical research and related matters. I found our discussion to be quite interesting and very informative. You truly are an expert.

I have enclosed the article from the Wall Street Journal regarding the present state of many of the crafts in Japan. I hope you find it interesting.

Thank you again. Take care.

Sincerely,



Bruce A. Hironaka

Enclosure

# Japan Has Preserved Many Ancient Crafts, Yet They Are Fading

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## Apprentice Swordsmiths Lack Patience, but Then Who

## Needs a Sword Anymore? ◇

By E.S. BROWNING

Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

TOKYO—Ask Kiyoshi Kato his profession, and he will pull out a gleaming steel sword with a wooden handle. Mr. Kato, a swordsmith like his father and grandfather before him, will explain how he takes a jagged lump of raw metal and—using techniques more than 1,000 years old—turns it into the traditional weapon of the samurai.

But if you ask Mr. Kato how he pays his bills, he will carefully put the sword aside and nod toward a front room of his house. There, he and his wife have a small store selling paint, wrenches, scissors and pliers. It is a little demeaning for a swordsmith to sell hardware, especially since it is the kind of industrial product that is driving traditional craftsmen out of business. But Mr. Kato has no choice.

“It is very difficult today to make a living just from swords,” he explains. “There are some people who do that, but I think their lives must be very hard.”

### Art and Lost Art

One of the remarkable things about Japan is its ability, more than 100 years after its industrial revolution, to support swordsmiths, comb makers, puppeteers, Kabuki actors and others who work much as craftsmen did for centuries in feudal Japan. One by one, however, such people *are* disappearing, and the secrets handed down to them for generations are being lost. Mr. Kato, for instance, has no son, and the apprentices he has taken in over the years all have quit in frustration. Chances are good that in another 20 or 30 years, his line, too, will come to an end.

“Young people aren’t much interested in traditional crafts anymore,” says a senior foreign-ministry official. “Most of the products are too expensive for ordinary people to own, and few really understand them anyhow.”

Craftsmen find it hard to change old ways. Mitsumasa Minekawa, the sixth in a line of master comb makers that goes back 300 years, has been carving combs for 40 years. A visitor to Mr. Minekawa’s shop is likely to get advice on his hair whether he asks for it or not.

### Tiny Teeth

“Try this,” Mr. Minekawa tells a visitor, proffering a polished wooden comb with tiny, closely spaced teeth. The visitor’s hair is thinning, and Mr. Minekawa thinks he can help.

“The teeth will comb each hair individually,” the comb maker explains. “The wood is flexible, so the comb won’t pull your hair or tear it. It will actually make your scalp tingle.”

Sure enough, the boxwood comb, carved more than a decade ago by Mr. Minekawa’s father, does make the scalp tingle. Mr. Minekawa grins knowingly. “Prime Minister Nakasone [who combs his hair carefully over a bald pate] has one just like it,” he explains. The comb should last at least 80 years, he says, until the teeth wear away completely.

But if you want to get your own 80-year comb, you had better hurry. Fewer and fewer Japanese women are wearing the elaborate hairdos that once kept Mr. Minekawa’s ancestors busy, and Mr. Minekawa, who is 63, thinks he will be the last of his family to carve combs. His masterpieces cost \$100 and more, and there is little demand for them. “My father was known as the god of combs,” says Mr. Minekawa, his eyes glistening. “Today, no one uses our combs anymore.”

Some parts of Mr. Minekawa’s craft already are dead. Many of the combs, such as the one with the tiny teeth for balding men, were carved by Mr. Minekawa’s father, who died working, at the age of 85. The son says that no one, not even he, knows how to do that delicate work today.

Because the boxwood for his combs must dry for as long as 50 years, Mr. Mine-

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# Japan Has Preserved Its Crafts, But Now They Are Being Lost

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kawa carves combs from wood his father and grandfather laid away. If future generations are to follow, he needs to buy and store wood for them. But business is so slack, he says, that he no longer bothers. "I have enough left for 10 or 20 years," he says. "After that, I don't know what will happen."

One of the biggest problems in traditional arts is that learning may take decades. Apprentices these days often give up in despair. In *Bunraku*, Japanese puppeteering, the puppeteers themselves appear on stage beside their puppets, and their elaborate movements can take a lifetime to learn.

## Learning the Left Hand

By tradition, the new puppeteer spends his first seven years studying only the puppet's legs. If he does well, he is allowed to devote his next seven years to the left hand. Only then does he graduate to the head and the right hand, which are manipulated together, and which he is expected to study 10 years more.

"To play the head in a very important role; you must study 40 to 50 years," says Rodayu Toyotake V (known professionally as Rodayu V), a *Bunraku* singer whose songs narrate the performances. Learning to narrate, he adds, can be harder still, since the narrator must learn 150 different styles of singing, none of them written down.

In exchange for his diligence, the puppeteering apprentice is paid only about \$240 a month. With government stipends and special pay for touring with the performers, he can hope to earn about \$5,000 a year. Rodayu says that apprentices often live for years in tiny rooms whose only plumbing is a water basin, until they become prominent performers. He himself moonlights as a *Kabuki* singer to make ends meet. The best young candidates, he adds, no longer even apply.

"To survive in *Bunraku* today, you must be without any interest in money or desire for goods," says Rodayu. "Unfortunately, many young people today think they should be compensated for their work. I think so, too."

## Young Performers Today

Even *Kabuki*, the best-known Japanese theater, has trouble recruiting actors. Both *Kabuki* and *Bunraku* now are obliged to obtain young performers through government-sponsored schools. But Rodayu complains that the schools don't train as well as the traditional apprenticeship, and he says graduates rarely become leading performers.

By sponsoring schools and granting subsidies, the Japanese government is trying to prevent traditional crafts from disappearing. One of the government's most

publicized efforts was the creation in 1955 of the title "living national treasure," which is conferred on at most 35 artisans and 35 theater people at any one time. In addition to a \$9,000 yearly government stipend, living national treasures can hope to see the prices of their products go up five-fold or tenfold.

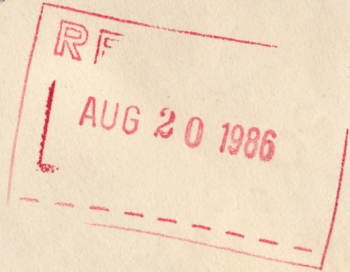
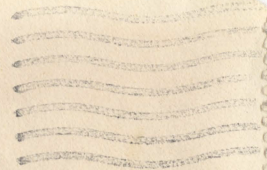
Some craftsmen, including swordsmiths, hang on in large part in hope of becoming national treasures. Others, such as potters, have managed to maintain broad popularity by selling their wares in department stores as household art, and to students of flower arranging or the traditional tea ceremony. Aspiring national treasures bide their time making sake cups and flower pots, as well as decorative bowls that look remarkably like ashtrays and sell for hundreds of dollars apiece.

Mr. Kato, the swordsmith, is making his own kind of painful adjustments. He compares his craft to preparing a pie crust, one difference being that each sword takes him a month to complete. He heats the metal and then carefully flattens and folds it over and over, a process that hardens the steel and forces out impurities. Sometimes, after a month's work, he is dissatisfied, so he melts the sword down and starts again. Now 41 years old, he has made fewer than three swords a year in the past 21 years since his father began teaching him the craft.

Mr. Kato's problem is that after World War II Japan hasn't needed many swords. To make ends meet, Mr. Kato's father was obliged years ago to begin making knives—work that a purist swordsmith would consider humiliating. At first, he made collectors' knives and wood-carving knives with elaborate handles. But today, the family also makes fish-slicing and vegetable-carving knives, so carefully turned out that only professional cooks can afford them. And then there is the Katos' hardware business.

"The best thing for a swordsmith is just making the swords, not the selling," explains Mr. Kato, who in his worn green shirt looks a bit like an auto mechanic. "The trouble is, you can't live like that. I feel very lonely because so few people buy swords. But it can't be helped, it is the flow of the times."

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