

# Timeless Style Requires Sustainable Businesses

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Text by Steve Jarvis Photos courtesy of Whole Love Kyoto

In retrospect, it is easy to connect the dots to explain how something of significance came into being. But when starting out on this journey, the motivations and decisions will often be just arbitrary or by chance. The "heritage business preservation eco-system" that is Whole Love Kyoto and Kyoto Traditional Culture Innovation Laboratory, is one such case.

回望歷史能為重要事物溯源，但由零開始的動機和接下來的決定卻往往是隨緣而生。Whole Love Kyoto 與京都傳統文化創新實驗室正是在機緣巧合下出現的「傳統商業保育生態」。

Almost on a whim, Professor Sakai set his fashion design class at Kyoto University of the Arts the task of coming up with some design concepts related to discovering Kyoto. What resulted was a pair of shoes that married the essence of old Kyoto with the practicalities of modern life. HANA O SHOES are a mixture of the elegant traditional "geta" wooden sandals worn with kimono and the practicality of comfortable sneakers. It was an eye-catching design. It also became the catalyst for a new way of thinking about how to preserve Kyoto's rich arts and crafts heritage.

In 2018, 50 variations of HANA O SHOES were exhibited at Kyoto's spring festival "Miyako Odori" (celebrating Geisha and Maiko arts), and the daring matching of silk sandal strapping (hanao) and sneakers drew much attention. Crucially, some leading figures in Japan's footwear industry also showed a lot of interest in the design. Such positive reactions helped kickstart the process of taking the shoes from a quirky design for a class project, to the first product of Whole Love Kyoto (WLK), the company Sakai founded to synthesise the best of Kyoto's traditional craftsmanship with modern design sensibilities.



#### VINYL WAGASA (Vinyl Umbrella)

This update of the wagasa, the iconic Japanese umbrella, retains the bamboo frame but replaces the oiled paper covering with plastic. The Whole Love Kyoto take on Wagasa wants to challenge the negative environmental connotations involved with disposable umbrellas, as well as highlight the elegance and beauty that defines the Japanese umbrella. This umbrella is beautiful, practical, and a perfect fit for traditional Japanese clothing. This everyday product brings what is useful in the modern version to what is really attractive about the original.

#### 乙烯基塑膠和傘

傳統和傘換上新裝後保留了竹製傘骨，但油紙則換成塑膠。Whole Love Kyoto的和傘巧思，是挑戰即棄雨傘所帶來的環境影響，同時帶出日本和傘獨有的優雅美態。這把和傘美麗與實用兼備，能完美配合傳統日式服裝。日常用品的現代版本不但實用，也帶出和傘的原有魅力。

"Old is New" is both catchphrase and core concept for WLK. Sakai explains, "If you are able to change the way you look at traditional products, traditional practices, and traditional ideas, it is possible to create new products while not losing the essence of the originals." Breathing new life into traditional handicrafts, and making them useful in a contemporary context is a consultative process, which requires borrowing the artisans' techniques and knowledge, and re-shaping things in a way that is attractive to a younger market. This process is best illustrated with the story HANAO SHOES' development.

#### Consultation and collaboration are the foundation

Originally the brainchild of budding designers, HANAO SHOES became a real product through a series of consultations with traditional Japanese shoe artisans, refining the design, materials, and manufacturing techniques for the strapping. For shoe production, they engaged Moon Star, a footwear company with a 150-year history of making rubber-soled shoes. The sales and marketing are done under the brand name Whole Love Kyoto, using modern concepts such as pop-up stores, social media marketing, online shopping, and collaborations with major fashion brands such as Beams Japan. Applying modern marketing to a re-designed product is a relatively straightforward recipe for success, but the implications of their work goes deeper. Talking to Kyoto's artisans yielded Sakai, and the core young designers that became WLK, more than insight into their techniques. They came to understand the reality of the challenges facing the arts and crafts industry. While Kyoto is home to over 600 businesses that have existed for more

than a hundred years, and many of them for much longer, heritage businesses face seemingly insurmountable problems. These include declining sales, which is part of not having products geared to today's society, and not having the ability to expand into larger markets to sell the products they make. On top of this, even if they have viable businesses, they often have successor problems with no one able to inherit their legacy. Sakai had always focused on western fashion, paying little attention to the traditional design and craftsmanship surrounding him. The potential of HANAO SHOES was a revelation for Sakai, and the pathway forward for heritage businesses became clear. "To continue sustainably is the most important thing, it means there has to be a way to make a profit from their activities, not just for WLK, but to sustain the artisans and to have their works better known." His solution was to record and disseminate the city's important cultural legacy in traditional arts and handicrafts by creating the Kyoto Innovation Research Center for Traditional Culture (abbreviated to KYOTO T5) as a heritage research organisation based at the Kyoto University of Arts.

#### Archiving precious knowledge opens new doors

Started with just three people in 2018, KYOTO T5 has grown rapidly. Now, the organisation has approximately 30 students and affiliated researchers that go into the Kyoto community recording the works and life stories of the cities' artisans and heritage businesses. The interviews are published online and serve as an archive of arts and crafts heritage alive in Kyoto today. Although, the goal of communicating heritage has a dual purpose, as the research process also creates an



extensive network of artisan relationships that can be drawn upon by WLK to realise new designs based on a deeper understanding of their crafts. With both KYOTO T5 and WLK operating in tandem and being local, it is possible to establish long-term relationships with the artisans for follow-up research and consultation. It allows them to discover new and interesting aspects of an artisan's work that would not be clear in a single meeting. It also enables them to freely propose ideas and do follow-ups, bring the artisans prototypes, and get feedback on the product's development. There is also great diversity within the creative pool in KYOTO T5, where the ages and interests of the researchers are varied, complementing the diversity and richness found within the heritage businesses. It is this rich pool of perspectives and creativity that gives shape to the designs and possibilities of WLK products. Over a four-year period, the collaboration has generated dozens of products of artisanal quality that have compelling backstories. All WLK products are made using local and Japanese inputs. Sometimes the artisans will make the entire product and WLK will do the packaging and sales; other times, the artisan will contribute to only specific aspects of development when creating a new WLK product. For Sakai, it is critical to make heritage industries as sustainable as possible. "Japan's market has little capacity to formally support artisan industries, and there was no organisation working to help them continue into the future. Therefore, it is necessary for organisations like KYOTO T5 and WLK to act as middleman to facilitate artisans to create new markets and generate new income. Having young people and people with an understanding of contemporary fashion trends and sense can also help artisans create, package and sell a product."

#### Looking beyond Kyoto for markets and ideas

Sakai thinks it is vital to expand into the international market for heritage industries to survive. This prompted him to pursue cooperation with design institutions in Europe, to develop

new sales channels, and to further challenge traditional artisan practices with fresh perspectives from abroad. Apart from holding seminars and exhibitions abroad, KYOTO T5 also offers placements to international students, pairing them with Japanese counterparts to do fieldwork with artisans. Noting the influx of fresh perspectives, Sakai considers the move a success, "The overseas students are very engaged and more enthusiastic about the opportunity to work with masters in Kyoto than most of the Japanese students." Directly exposing the public to Kyoto's handicraft masters is a core WLK activity. Before COVID, they regularly held workshops with artisans, offering a privileged insight for participants, while generating income for the heritage businesses. During COVID, this ground to a halt. Responding to calls from artisans struggling to sell their wares and bereft of customer interaction, they started online workshops. However, WLK went a step beyond passive viewing by sending workshop kits to Japanese-speaking participants worldwide, allowing them to follow the artisan's instructions online to make things such as miniature lamps (Chochin), or decorative packaging. In recent years, KYOTO T5 has gained significant attention, and they are now getting inquiries from companies and cultural organisations, and are frequently requested to research on particular artisans and handicraft techniques or facilitate introductions to heritage businesses. Also, when they have an idea for a product that would benefit from collaboration with a larger company, they now have the credibility and track record with KYOTO T5 to actively make proposals for collaborations. In turn, WLK has also looked beyond just Kyoto, for example, doing a themed variation of HANAO SHOES based on characteristics of each of Japan's 47 prefectures. Sakai believes, "Japan has a lot of potential to preserve and draw upon the cultural treasures and skills of the nation, but this needs to be done in cooperation with industry as the scale is quite large."

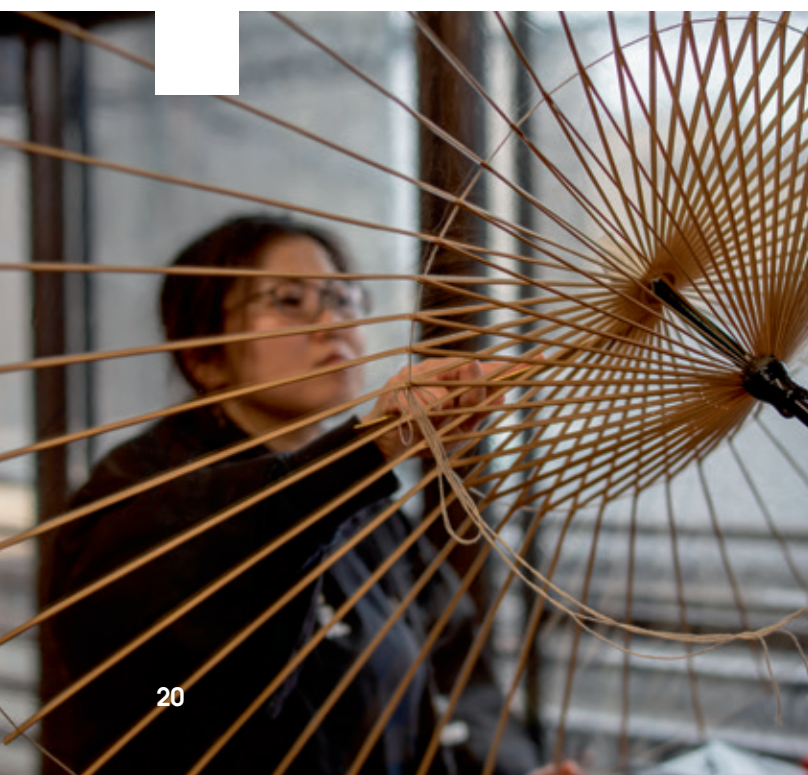


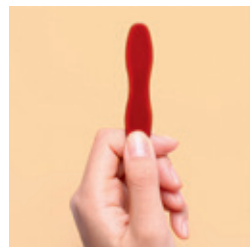
#### TOCHU:

Tochu translates as "incomplete" in Japanese. This elegant scarf has been carefully prepared between tied blocks and dyed by a master craftsman using the traditional shiborisome (squeezed dyeing). However, it is sold to the customers in an incomplete form. It is only when the strings are released that the scarf appears in its full form. This creation has a sense of discovery or completion of a master's work that highlights the process as much as the finished product, and is designed to help people understand and appreciate what goes into making the product.

#### 途中：

途中 在日語的意思是「不完全」。這款典雅的圍巾由工藝大師以傳統絞染法，小心把布料綁成紋理加以漂製而成。然而，它卻以不完全的形態出售，顧客在打開繩子才可以看到圍巾的全貌。這種創作在意識上是一種發現過程，也可以理解為完成大師的作品，強調了過程和成品同樣重要，幫助人們明白和欣賞匠人需要付出心思和努力才能製作產品。





#### ICE CREAM GIFT:

The complimentary wooden spoons accompanying ice cream cups are rarely given any thought. However, WLK saw it as an opportunity to re-evaluate such carefree disposability by having a range of artisans create versions of the spoon. Starting with lacquer, they used the same design for decorated metal, glass, stone and many more versions. Exposing people to these various forms of the simple spoon helps people to consider artisanal crafts. They also provide an opportunity to put a range of traditional techniques into a standardised form to encourage the appreciation of the variety of approaches and allow qualitative comparison of skills and sensory experience.

#### 雪糕贈品：

很少人會留意隨雪糕附贈的小木勺子，但WLK認為小木勺子能提供重新審視用完即棄的機會，於是邀請了多位匠人創作不同版本的勺子。他們由漆藝開始，再以金屬、玻璃、石材等做出了很多裝飾款式，讓人們看到簡單小木勺子的種種形態，有助人們思考匠人手藝，同時可以在同一形態上運用各式傳統工藝，鼓勵人們欣賞多元化的手法，深入比較不同的技藝和感官體驗。

### Valuable lessons applicable anywhere

What Sakai and his colleagues have done is to create a "heritage business preservation eco-system." It has all levels of engagement, from contacting and researching artisanal businesses, to making them co-developers and designers for new products that are updated and adapted to changing market conditions, while also taking care of the production, marketing and sales of the products. They are doing it with the aim of providing a sustainable and long-standing business environment for artisans that may otherwise not have sustainable futures. When asked about the importance of heritage preservation, Sakai responds, "It doesn't matter where you are, and it doesn't have to be about preserving culture, it is just as much about preserving the essence of the country or the region, it is important to preserve the objects and products that contribute to this. If you don't preserve it you will lose the flavour of a city, region, or even country. In that sense, our activities can serve as one model for how to go about preserving the elements that are important to retain the character of a place."

設計搶眼的HANA O SHOES出自酒井教授的手筆，他的創作過程可謂源自靈機一觸。在京都藝術大學教授時裝設計課時，他把其中一項課題定為呈現京都特色的設計概念。結果，他創造了一雙融合了老京都氣息與現代生活實用性的鞋子，把傳統配襯和服的典雅木屐與舒適的帆布鞋二合為一。作品更成為了重新思考如何保育京都豐富藝術和工藝傳承的催化劑。五十款HANA O SHOES在2018年的京都春季「都舞會」上展出。在這個歌頌藝技和舞妓的節日上，HANA O SHOES破格地把木屐上的絲質「鼻緒」(hanao)鞋帶和運動鞋互相搭配，引起了不少迴響，包括多位日本鞋履業界領軍人物對設計表示興趣。這些正面評價幫助鼻緒運動鞋開展了全新的旅程：從源自課堂習作的奇特設計化身Whole

Love Kyoto (簡稱WLK)的首件產品。WLK是酒井成立的公司，旨在把京都最優良的傳統工藝與現代設計的感性巧思糅合為新時尚。「Old is New」(古風新潮)是WLK的口號，也是品牌的核心概念。酒井解釋說：「如果你能夠改變自己對傳統產品、傳統做法和傳統意念的看法，便可以創造出保留原貌精粹的新品。」為傳統工藝賦予新生命，令其在現代環境下仍然發揮功用，便需要借助匠人的技藝和知識，把物件重塑成吸引年輕消費者的潮物；HANA O SHOES的發展正好見證了這個協商的過程。

### 協商與協作是古風新潮的根基

HANA O SHOES本來是新晉設計師的想法，經過與傳統日本鞋履匠人多翻協商交流，逐步優化了鼻緒鞋帶的款式、物料和製作技巧，鞋子現在已成為真正的產品。他們委聘了擁有150年生產膠底鞋歷史的Moon Star公司製鞋，以Whole Love Kyoto作為銷售與宣傳的品牌。為了推廣重新設計的產品，公司採用了期間限定店、社交媒體宣傳、網購和與Beams Japan等知名品牌合作等方法。這些現代宣傳技巧令品牌成功突圍而出，但作品的影響卻比銷情更為深遠。酒井與後來成為WLK核心的年輕設計師，因為過程中不斷與京都匠人交流對話獲益不淺，他們除了深入了解工藝技巧，還開始明白藝術和工藝業界所面對的真正挑戰。雖然京都有超過600家開業逾百年甚至更久的老店，但傳統商號面對不少難以克服的問題。由於所出售的產品並非為現今社會而設計，老店無法接觸更大市場，以致產品滯銷、銷情下滑。另一方面，即使部分老店仍然經營有利可圖的生意，他們很多時都面對著祖業後繼無人的傳承問題。酒井以往只集中鑽研西方時裝，少有留意自己身邊的傳統設計和工藝。HANA O SHOES的潛力令酒井頓開茅塞，看出了傳統文化產業的清晰前景。他表示：「可持續發展是最重要的一環，換言之，一定要令匠人的工藝活動得到盈利。這不只是為了WLK，而是讓匠人能夠自給自足，令他們的作品更多人認識。」於是，他在京都藝術大學成立了京都傳統文化創新研究中心(簡稱KYOTO T5)，目的是紀錄和傳播京都市在傳統藝術和工藝的重要文化傳承。

### 以珍貴知識寶藏開拓新天地

KYOTO T5於2018年成立之初只有3人，現時發展為擁有約30名學生和附屬研究人員的團隊。他們走進京都的社區，紀錄城中匠人和傳統企業的作品和生命故事。所有訪談均於線上發表，成為現今京都藝術和工藝傳承的資料庫。這種傳承交流有兩大目標，WLK在研究過程中建立了廣泛的匠人人脈，令其可以在更深入了解匠人工藝後好好善用，實現新舊融合的設計。

KYOTO T5和WLK兩項在地計劃同時運作，可與匠人建立長遠關係，持續跟進研究和諮詢，讓研究人員和設計師有機會發現一些無法單憑一次會面而得知的匠人工作趣事。他們還可以在會面期間暢所欲言，提出自己的想法和繼續跟進，例如把原型設計帶給匠人品評，徵詢寶貴的產品發展意見。KYOTO T5的創作人才庫結構多元，研究人員來自不同的年齡層、有男有女，而且興趣多樣，與傳統文化產業所涉及的多元性和豐富性不謀而合。豐富多樣的視角和創意，成就了WLK產品包羅萬有的設計和可能性。四年以來，各項合作已產生了數十件媲美匠人品質的產品，說出了一個接一個的動人故事。所有WLK產品都是以日本當地的材料製成。有時候，匠人會完成整件產品，再由WLK負責包裝和銷售；也有些時候，匠人只會在新品研發的個別範疇提意見。對於酒井來說，盡量延續傳統文化產業的永續性至關重要。「日本的本土市場沒有足夠的容量來為匠人產業提供官方支持，而且也沒有組織幫助商號繼續向未來發展。因此，日本很需要KYOTO T5和WLK一類機構來擔任中間人，促進匠人創造新的市場和新的收入來源。得到年輕人和明白當代時裝潮流、具備時常觸覺的人加入，也可以幫助匠人創作、包裝和出售產品。」

### 衝出京都，尋找新市場、新意念

酒井認為打入國際市場對傳統文化產業的生存非常重要，所以他決定與歐洲的設計學院尋求合作機會，一同發展新的銷售渠道，並以國外的新鮮觀點進一步挑戰傳統匠人的做法。除了遠赴海外主持研討會和舉行展覽，KYOTO T5也向世界各地的學生提供到日本與匠人學習的實習配對機會。酒井認為這種做法可以成功引入大量新視角，他說：「相對於大部分日本學生，海外學生更為投入，而且對親臨京都與大師一同工作的機會更有熱誠。」

WLK其中一項核心活動，是向公眾直接說好京都工藝大師的故事。在2019新型冠狀病毒疫情爆發以前，他們會定期聯同匠人舉辦工作坊，為參加者提供獨特的見解，同時為傳統老店創造收入。疫情期間，這方面的工作只能暫停。為回應匠人難以出售產品和欠缺與客戶互動的渠道，WLK開始舉辦線上工作坊，還為被動觀看視頻多走一步，把工作坊的製作包寄給世界各地會說日語的參加者，讓他們可以按照匠人的線上指示，一同製作迷你提燈又或裝飾性的包裝等。KYOTO T5近年已贏得不少注視，不時收到企業和文化組織查詢，也常被邀請就個別匠人或工藝技巧進行研究，為傳統文化老店穿針引線。另一方面，當他們認為某些產品意念可以因為與較大規模公司合作而得到較大效益時，會善用KYOTO T5的信譽和往績來積極提出合作建議。就此，WLK已把目光放在京都以外，例如根據日本全國47個縣的特徵來製作HANA O SHOES的變奏版。酒井表示：「日本有很大潛力去保育和發掘全國的文化寶藏和技藝，但由於規模龐大，這些工作必需與業界合作推動。」

### 四海皆通的道理

酒井與同事致力創造「傳統商業的保育生態」，但這些工作需要社會各階層全面參與，包括聯絡和研究匠人老店、促成他們與設計師合作，成為新產品的共同研發人等。新產品也需要經過更新才能適應不斷改變的市場環境；另外也要顧及產品的生產、宣傳和銷售。他們的目的，是為匠人提供可持續發展和經得起時間考驗的商業環境，協助他們打造永續未來。被問到保育傳統的重要，酒井答道：「無論你在何方，重點不是只為了保存文化，而是保育國家或地區的精髓。我們深信守護代表文化和人文精神的物件和產品最為重要。如果不加以保育，你便會失去城市、地區以致國家的韻味。由此說來，我們的活動可以充當一個小示範，說明如何保育某個地方的獨有特徵和元素。」

#### Yousuke Sakai

Yousuke Sakai is a designer working in graphic, book and jewellery design. He holds the dual positions of Associate Professor in the Affiliation Department of Spatial Design, and Director, Kyoto Innovation Research Center for Traditional Culture, at the Kyoto University of the Arts. He also heads up the design companies Chimaski and Whole Love Kyoto.

#### 酒井洋輔

酒井洋輔是一位設計師，從事平面、書籍和珠寶設計，在京都藝術大學兼任空間設計附屬學系的副教授及京都傳統文化創新研究中心的主任。他也是Chimaski和Whole Love Kyoto兩家公司的主管。

