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**Double-edged Legacy:
Balancing Heritage and Progress
in the Japanese knife industry**

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要旨

本研究は、日本の刃物産業が中世以来培われた伝統的な技術と文化的な蓄積をどのように継承し、現代の国内外市場の変動にいかに関に柔軟に responding しているかを総合的に検証するものである。

第1章では、古代中国の『莊子』における「庖丁」という語彙を起点とし、漢字表記の変遷と平安期の庖丁道、草戸千軒遺跡から発掘された出土品や北野天神絵巻などの史料をベースに、包丁が宗教的・儀礼的意義から実用的な調理具へと進化していく歴史的経緯を明らかにした。また、戦国期の鍛造技術の革新を通じ、刀剣技法との密接な関連性が示され、江戸期における堺と関という二大刃物産地の形成過程を跡付けた。

第2章では、堺と関が中世から近世・近代に至るまで、それぞれの産業モデルを確立し、伝統技術と生産体制を発展させてきた様子を分析する。堺は、16世紀にタバコ包丁で一躍注目を浴び、問屋・分業体制と堺極印による厳格な品質管理に支え、高品質な包丁を供給してきたが、明治期の近代化の波に乗り遅れた結果、現在若手不足や職人高齢化という課題に直面している。一方、関は美濃伝の刀剣技術を基盤とし、戦国期の量産体制を発展させた後、明治以降の機械化・受託製造であるOEMの導入により、貝印株式会社など大手ブランドを輩出し、世界市場での認知度と存在感を高めてきた。両地域はそれぞれ異なるアプローチを取る中で、伝統の維持と産業合理性の両立という共通のジレンマに直面している。

第3章では、筆者が2024年1月から8月にかけて東京・合羽橋道具街にある包丁専門店において実施した半年のフィールドワークの成果を基に、現場での実体験と消費者の認識を詳細に記録している。初来店時の期待と実際の店舗環境、そして職場での学びを通じ、ハンドメイドという言葉に込められた伝統的イメージと、実際に依拠される機械プレスや大量生産製造との間に存在する微妙なズレが浮き彫りにされた。これにより、観光客やプロ料理人、マニアックといった多様な顧客層の実態と、店舗のブランド構築との相互作用が具体的事例として示される。

第4章では、コロナ禍後のリモートワーク普及、巣ごもり需要、インバウンド観光の回復、さらにはEコマース市場の拡大といったマクロ環境の変化を背景にし、堺と関それぞれの現状と課題を統計データや事例を通じて分析している。堺では、伝統工芸的な価値を武器にした地域振興策が試みられる一方で、OEM依存によるブランド希薄化や後継者不足といった構造的問題が指摘された。関では、合理化と大量生産体制を進めつつも、グローバル競争が激化する中で「職人精神」の希薄化をいかに防ぐかが重要な課題として浮上する。

総じて、堺と関という対照的な二大産地が、それぞれ独自の歴史的・技術的伝統を背景にしながらも、機能的面での「切れ味」、美的な「芸術性」という核を追求してきたことを示している。伝統の維持と革新の両立、そして市場の変化に柔軟に対応する生産体制やブランド戦略の再定義が、今後の持続可能な発展にとって鍵となるであろう。さらに、福井の武生など、他地域における協働体制の事例も示唆し、日本包丁づくりが未来に向けてどのように進化していくべきか、再考の一助となることを期待する。

INTRODUCTION

At the end of January 2023, amid the winter chill of Tokyo's Asakusa district, I found myself navigating Kappabashi Street—an open air mall of sorts, similar to what you the shopping areas you may find close to any Tokyo's railway station, at the same time unlike any other considering its the products it offers: pots and chopsticks, cutting boards and ceramics, cooking utensils of all sorts, a must stop for anyone considering to launch their cooking career. And then there were, glimmering in the gentle sunlight of the early afternoon, through the glassy windows of many shops, knives. Knives in open cardboard boxes and plastic packaging, knives elegantly arranged in crystal display cases of shapes, sizes, and designs I had never seen before. But I digress, as I have not yet explained the reason for my visit to Asakusa's most bustling shopping area. Like many foreign students in Japan, I had planned to enjoy the first half of my exchange year; and then eventually give a shot at a part-time job, at one of the local convenience stores, as many colleagues before me had done and suggested. Life at Seikei University I would find out, located in what is one of the more expensive areas of Tokyo, Kichijoji, at the far end of the Chūō line, was as enjoyable as it was costly. Finances were dwindling much quickly than I had planned. This brings us back to Asakusa, in which shops advertise fairly high hourly wages and language skills are highly valued. Confident that I would find little difficulty in getting a job in the area, with my English and Japanese, armed with a stack of printed resumes in hand, I ventured into Kappabashi, looking for shops with “Staff Wanted” posters affixed at their entrances.

Outside one of the more eye catching storefronts, a small crowd had gathered around what seemed a demonstration: the shopkeeper, a tall red-haired caucasian man, wielded a slender, willow-leaf-shaped blade, slicing a gleaming white vegetable - japanese white radish, or daikon - into paper-thin sheets with a single fluid semi-circular motion. “A Yanagiba-bōchō, a 400-year-old sashimi knife design, hand forged in Sakai from high-carbon Japanese steel,” he would explain in English. While at first, it seemed bizarre that he would use English, a second look at the small group of people and my surroundings made me take in the fact I had barely passed by any Tokyoite local since stepping foot in Kappabashi. The second thing I realized was that many of the shops in Kappabashi, Japanese, hand-made, and hand-forged (although both terms are often misused interchangeably, they refer to very different products. We'll

explore the reasons for this distinction in Chapter 3.), cooking knives were the main attractive. In stark contrast to the inexpensive 100-yen-shop knife I had grown accustomed to, the one in front of me had a weight to it; despite my untrained eye, I could tell that there was some truth behind the “400 years” of history that the shopkeeper claimed. After the demonstration, I noticed the shop was also taking in English-speaking part-timers, so I handed my resume to that same shopkeeper, who would turn out to be the store manager. Half-puzzled, half-engrossed by the experience, I headed back home. Days later, a twist of fate will have me take on the role of sales associate at that same shop, a position I held for the remaining 6 months of my year abroad, from January until August. What had started as a regular part-time job experience, quickly became a life-changing stroke of luck, a roller coaster that immersed me in a millennia-old history of utmost dedication to craftsmanship, passed down from generation to generation; this 6 months compelled me to scout web articles, documentaries and specialized magazines at first, then municipal records of craftsman, the too scarce literature on knife makers, and eventually led me to the decision of making it the object of my master degree dissertation.

Below are the core questions I hope to find an answer to, by tackling this project:

Who are the actors that preserved the ways of Japanese knife-making, and how was it possible to preserve such specialistic know-how? And more importantly, what are the reasons, both technical and cultural, at the root of such a long history? Why did it have to be this design and not any other variant? What factors and actors were at play in the early stages of the knife industry, and what evolutions did they go through in the various historical eras of Japan? To attempt to answer this, I trace the evolution of *hōchō* —the Japanese knife—from its etymological origins in Zhuangzi’s work, through the tumultuous warring years of Sengoku and the vibrant urban days of Edo-era Japan, until today’s developments in retail shops, much like the one in Kappabashi, and industry-leading firms.

Chapter 1: Tracing the evolution of blades, from Jōmon to Edo

1.1 Introduction: The Cooking Knife, a culturally charged artifact

Words make worlds; tools bring them to life - is an idea that neatly fits in our description at the very start of our journey, much like the tang of a blade perfectly sits in its handle. In the Japanese language, unlike many others, a very unique word has been reserved to refer to the cooking knife: the lexicon *hōchō* - written as 包丁 in modern Japanese - carries within its characters a deep history of cross-cultural metamorphosis, one that begins not in domestic forges, but in China, as similarly did most of the country's written language.

We can trace the origin of the term in the *Zhuangzi*, a Chinese text of the Warring states era (4th century BC), at the foundation of Taoism, whose chapter titled the *The Principles of Nourishing Life* (*Yang Sheng Zhu*) immortalizes the tale of a particular butcher - referred to in the text as *hōtei*, 庖丁 - Ding the Butcher. As its author Zhuang Zhou recounts:

“^{ほうてい}庖丁、文惠君の為に牛を解く”¹

(The cook carves an ox to be served to the king Hui)

The cook did so with such elegant grace that has left King Hui of Wei astonished by such a display of skills. To the king's astonishment Ding had replied:

“臣の好む所の者は道なり、技よりも進めり。[...] 今、臣の刀は十九年、解く所は数千牛、而して刀刃は新たに^{けい}硎より発せるが若し”²

(my blade is as sharp as if it had been just sharpened on a whetstone, despite its 19 years of service)

(translation by the author)

Here, the term ^{ほうてい}庖丁 (*páodīng*) is used to refer not to the knife, but to the cook who wields it, the artisan-philosopher who bundles its tool and mastery over it into one.

This concept would move to Japan during the Asuka and Nara periods (6th–8th centuries CE), a time when Japan's aristocracy was engrossed with and therefore adopted much of the Chinese writing, ways of governance, and of most interest to our research, their culinary arts and its specialized vocabulary. The sword-like knife that Ding wielded in Zhuang Zhou's tale

¹ YASUI Kōtarō, *Zhuangzi “The Principle of Nourishing Life”* 44/121

² YASUI Kōtarō, *ibid*, 44/121

would arrive in the country as 庖丁^{ほうていがたな}刀, and although it is unclear when, eventually, the 刀 was lost, and the cooking knife became commonly named 庖丁. By the Edo period (1603–1868), the original characters 庖丁—combining 庖 (meaning “kitchen”) and 丁 (a “profession”)—had transformed into 包丁. The new orthography, an ateji (phonetic borrowing), replaced 庖 (commonly read as *Hō*) with 包 (“to wrap”), thus recalling the knife’s role in *embracing and encasing* culinary artistry within a cultural identity.³

The evolution that the term for cooking knife went through is one of many similar ones that occurred in the Japanese language - and it mirrors Japan’s characteristic pattern of synthesizing external cultural influences into one single indigenous bundle, often reshaping the original meanings altogether. Where Zhuangzi’s story celebrated the chef’s spiritual mastery of culinary arts, as Japan became the land of the solemn samurai, similarly significant shifts affected uses, users and designs of the cooking knife. The domestic cuisines demanded specialized shapes: the thick-spined *deba-bōchō*, designed to disjoint meat of fishes from the bones without it chipping, and the slim *yanagiba*, which recalls in many aspects the design of a Japanese traditional Katana, and is the weapon of choice for sushi chefs of today and of Edo Japan. Both the Deba knife and the Yanagiba are knife shapes popularized around the 16th-17th century in the fisheries of Osaka city, at the time kitchen of the whole realm.

In *Rice as Self*, Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney argues the Tokugawa shogunate’s *sakoku* - a policy of isolation of the country from foreign influences, that lasted until the arrival of Commodore Perry’s black ships - spurred efforts to codify “native” traditions recasting foreign-derived concepts as quintessentially Japanese⁴. The court multipurpose knife that we will encounter later in our section on late Yayoi-Kofun Japan, was in fact an imported good that became a tool of cultural reclamation - and its Chinese roots likely obscured by the above-mentioned tendency to nativism.

Yet, as Tanaka Ryo from Sakai Ichimonji Mitsuhide - a Sakai-based centuries-old knife workshop - notes in their article *Hōchō no Kotoba (The Words of the Knife)*, Zhuang Zhou’s parable endured till today’s branding lore of Sakai artisans. Just as Ding’s blade followed the

³ knifeJapan (n.d.). *Why do we call a Japanese kitchen knife a ‘hōchō’?* Retrieved

⁴ Ohnuki-Tierney (1993), *Rice as Self: Japanese Identities Through Time*. Princeton: Princeton University Press

‘spaces between’ the muscle fibers, Sakai Ichimonji knives are designed to become an extension of the chef’s vision, tools that surpass the mere mechanical skills and engage the user in a conversation with what it is they are carving.⁵

Tanaka’s words resemble what is found in Theodore C. Bestor’s “*Tsukiji: The Fish Market at the Center of the World*”: the author’s interviews with professionals from Tokyo’s biggest market reveals about the “maguro no kaiwa”, or conversation of the salmon. According to Tsukiji’s workers, filleting down Japan’s most prized fish is not simply a task, but a conversation between the shokunin - which translates to artisan, and is commonly used in the culinary world - the knife, and the fish.⁶

This sort of imagery denotes that the Japanese knife is much more than a simple culinary tool - it is a symbol of the country’s cultural identity, etched with layers of borrowed Chinese philosophy, adapted Japanese craftsmanship, and of reinvented national tradition.

Methodology and Challenges of Reconstruction

In order to retrace the evolution of Japanese knives from their most primitive state, in Jōmon period, we had to overcome significant challenges due to the very nature of these tools objects of this research: knives were multifunctional tools of daily uses, prone to use and abuse, wear and tear, and their preservation through the centuries was not a priority. This aspect also denotes one crucial feature of primitive implements. Shōhei Hakoda notes that in humanity’s primitive days, early tools served as extensions of the human body, and belonged to a blurred realm where blurred was the distinction between culinary, craft, and ritual purposes.⁷

In primitive Japanese communities, knives’ progenitors were, in other words, not only tools at the cornerstone of survival which amplified human capacities, but also served a spiritual function, as we will see later from findings of Kōfun tombs excavations.

⁵ TANAKA Ryō (2021). “*Hōchō no koto*” to wa? (「庖丁之言」とは?). <https://hocho.ichimonji.co.jp/about/>
Updated 27-10-2023, retrieved 22-12-2024

⁶ Bestor, T. C. (2004). *Tsukiji: The fish market at the center of the world*. University of California Press.

⁷ HAKODA Shōhei 箱田昌平 (2021), *Hōchō no inobēshon to Nihon ryōri no shinka* (包丁のイノベーションと日本料理の進化), *Economic Journal*, Vol. 47, No. 2.

With this study, we employed an interdisciplinary methodology, synthesizing archaeological evidence from key sites, visual analyses of *emaki* scrolls from the Heian and Muromachi periods, and metallurgical studies of blades preserved in the Shōsōin repository of Nara.

The analytical structure that we implemented will reveal a three-phase evolution: a first stage of rudimentary stone knives (*ishi-bōchō*, Jōmon - Yayoi), the China-imported multifunctional *tōsu* (in the late Yayoi – Kofun), and the specialized cooking knives that started emerging alongside warrior-class demands in Kamakura and Muromachi periods.

By the time we reach Edo-era Japan, regional culinary practices will solidify knife-shapes into designs like the *Debabōchō* and *Yanagiba*, as documented in sales records of Sakai's merchant guilds.

Going back to the challenges that were presented during our research, the difficulty of getting access to the already scarce literature is of note. Necessitating reliance on indirect evidence - descriptions of corrosion-fragmented artifacts, illustrations of later-period knives, and comparative studies of continental imports. Overcoming such challenges was made possible by accessing digital repositories of treasuries and museums, and with a great deal of research enabled by the rich visuals in *emaki* scans, retrieved from the Cultural Heritage Online database provided by the Japanese Agency of Cultural Affairs. Cross checking these sources enabled systematic cross-referencing of material and iconographic data. This approach, combined with data retrieved from metallurgical reports on period katanas allowed us to pinpoint with relative precision the state of blacksmithing and metalworking, and build a map of technical advancements. This also allowed us to contextualize knives within socio-cultural shifts, addressing a longstanding gap in culinary tool historiography.

1.2 Early Blades: Jōmon to Yayoi Periods

Tools of the Stone Age

Corresponding to Japan's Neolithic and spanning over more than 10,000 years (13,000 - 300 BC), the start of Jōmon period marks the beginning of sedentary life in settlements for communities made up of hunters-gatherers, and with sea levels rising in Middle Jōmon (5,000 - 3,500 BC), fisherman as well. The tools they relied on to survive, build homes, prepare food, and defend themselves were rudimentary stone and obsidian implements: while seemingly simple in their shapes and rough in their polish, they exhibit features deliberately

designed for specialized tasks. Microblades the size of a fist enabled sufficiently precise slice-cutting motions and therefore a certain degree of processing of foodstuff; while bifacially flaked projectile points- crafted from chipping off flakes from a stone - served for hunting and defense. Professor Emeritus in Japanese Studies at Durham University Gina L. Barnes, during a lecture held in 2012 on Japanese archaeology of the Jōmon and Yayoi era, underscored how these stone tools proved indispensable for processing foodstuff, such as chestnuts and other forest produce - staple components of the early Jōmon diet.⁸



Fig. 1: stone implements from Ōdaiyamamoto site, Jōmon 10.000 BC,

Archaeological findings that were unearthed from shell mounds, often situated near or within village boundaries, give us further insight into the interconnectedness of these rudimentary stone blades and the societal structures that constituted the fabric of Jōmon communities. Harvesting shellfish, fishing and processing salmon, stable and abundant source of sustenance, are all successful attempts at adapting the tools available to the tasks at hand. Over time, as the Jōmon diet expanded, so too did the demands placed on tool design, and it is exactly in those times of necessities that we see first hints of evolution: the once almost

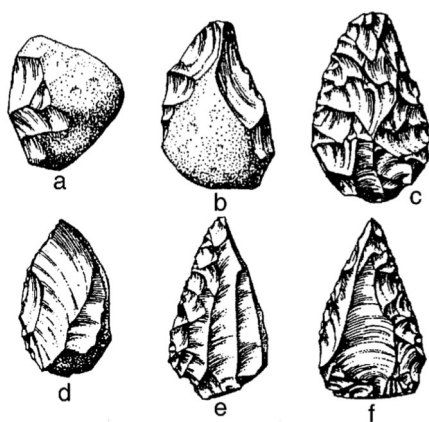


Fig. 2: The gradual evolution from single-edged, double-edged, and tip-equipped Jōmon stone tools.

rounded edges of the early Jōmon stone blades start displaying thinner, sharper cutting edges, more suitable for advanced tasks like peeling or cutting off the meat from the bones. These hints are precursors, albeit rudimentary, that foreshadow how Jōmon craftsmen had grasped a basic understanding of the science of cutting. These evolutionary steps were not born out of coincidences, but from a design process that began while tackling these proto-culinary tasks that would sustain the whole community; for each addition to the design of a

⁸ Barnes, G. (2012), *Lecture Report on Jōmon and Yayoi era communities*, Durham University

blade stone (a thinner edge, a more pointed tip, a second edge), we can speculate, there was a meticulously planned choice from the artisan behind it.

Shifting from Stone to Metal in the Late Yayoi

While eastern Japan's communities were adapting to new climates, lifestyle and tools in the late stages of Jōmon, the gears of change started moving in Western Japan, today's Kyūshū region. The Yayoi period (900 BC - 300 CE) brought major lifestyle and technological shifts, thanks to the first contacts with the continent. People from the Korean Peninsula moved into the Japanese archipelago through northern Kyūshū⁹ and among those people are recorded the arrivals of artisans, specialized in metalworking brought with them never-seen tools and techniques¹⁰: blades made of a material sturdier than stone and if heated properly malleable like clay. Japan is introduced to bronze and iron forging. The integration of these new technologies did not, however, happen overnight, and would not spread uniformly throughout the country. We will have to wait until the Late Yayoi (roughly around 300 CE) to see iron forging reach the northern areas of the main island.

With the following section, we will go through the archaeological evidence from major late Jōmon and Yayoi sites that underscore this gradual passage from the Stone Age to the Age of Bronze and Iron. We'll see that communities did not throw their stone tools in the rack, thanks to the appearance of these new sturdier, sharper, and more efficient iron blades, but kept on utilizing and developing the former while tackling how to properly handle the latter. The two coexisted for a good couple of centuries.

⁹ School of Science, University of Tokyo (2024), *Traces of ancient immigration patterns to Japan found in 2000-year-old genome* <https://www.s.u-tokyo.ac.jp/en/press/10527/> retrieved 22-12-2025

¹⁰ Gatti, F., & Caroli, R. (2004). *Storia del Giappone*. Editori Laterza.

Paying a visit to the sites:



Fig. 3 Sannai Maruyama Site, in Aomori Prefecture



Fig. 4 A multipurpose Jōmon stone implement, with jagged edges, and pronounced tip

Sannai Maruyama (Aomori Prefecture)

Situated on the outskirts of Aomori City, at the northern tip of Japan's main island, this site is renowned for its sheer size and rich collection of Jōmon period artifacts, dating back to approximately 3,900 to 2,200 years BC. The Sannai Maruyama archaeological site offers a fascinating glimpse into the lives of the Jōmon communities, and in particular on how tools evolved in response to their needs and way of life. Among the unearthed discoveries there are multipurpose stone blades, which reflect significant advancements in toolmaking during the period. For instance, one such stone blade (see Fig. 4) features a pointed edge and distinct indentations along its surface. The jagged edge was likely employed for processing food, such as slicing or skinning game, which aligns with evidence that the late Jōmon people were skilled and active hunters. This is further supported by the abundance of animal remains, including boar and deer bones, unearthed from waste disposal sites at the settlement¹¹. The indentations on the blade, on the other hand, suggest its use in crafting wooden tools and other intricate items essential for daily life. Together, these characteristics demonstrate how the Jōmon people adapted their

¹¹ Aomori Prefectural Government (n.d.), *Sannai Maruyama iseki* (三内丸山遺跡). <https://sannaimaruyama.pref.aomori.jp/about/iseki/> 27-12-2024

toolmaking techniques to meet the multifaceted demands of their environment, combining practicality with ingenuity.



Fig. 5: Yoshinogari Historical Park, in Saga Prefecture

Yoshinogari (Saga Prefecture)

Shifting our focus to the southwestern region of Japan, we arrive at one of the nation's most significant archaeological sites, located in Kanzaki City, Saga Prefecture. The Yoshinogari Historical Park, encompassing an expansive 40 hectares, represents a pivotal locus for examining the transition from the Jōmon to the Yayoi period. With this site, we are provided with a wealth of material evidence and unearthed artifacts that illustrate vividly the technological advancements brought by the migratory currents from Korea. Strategically situated in northwestern Kyūshū, Yoshinogari occupied a key position along migration and trade routes, serving as a critical gateway for interactions with the Korean Peninsula and mainland China. It is within this context of intercultural exchange that Bronze Age innovations - including the advent of wet rice agriculture - made their debut in the Japanese archipelago. Before delving into the world of forged knives and blades, at this juncture point makes its appearance the birth of what could be considered the first specialized utility knife of Japanese history, deeply connected to this new



Fig.6: iron blades for halberds, unearthed from Yoshinogari, in Saga prefecture

agricultural innovation.¹² This notable stone implement is known as the ishibōchō (いしほうちょう 石包丁) a specialized blade engineered explicitly for harvesting rice crops. Analysis of residues preserved on these excavated tools has revealed traces of rice lipids, providing compelling evidence for their exclusive role in early rice cultivation. During this nascent phase of rice agriculture, farmers exercised minimal control over the timing of crop harvests, relying instead on the natural maturation of the plants¹³. The design of the Ishi-Bōchō, characterized by its ergonomic, palm-enclosed form, enabled users to selectively harvest individual rice panicles, significantly upping the productivity of this task. This emphasis on a highly specific, singular functionality marks the earliest instance of tool specialization - a trend that would represent itself in subsequent centuries with produce-specific blade designs.



Fig.7: Ishi-bōchō unearthed from Yoshinogari Site

Foreign technologies: bronze and iron castings

By the 3rd century CE, communities, which had now been settled for centuries in the same settlements, got bigger in numbers and started experiencing power relations and conflicts with others¹⁴. As touched upon in the previous section, stone tools kept being employed up until the end of Yayoi, and were relegated to daily farming and crafting tasks. The craftsman of the settlement, taking the imported goods as a prototype, started experimenting with casting

¹² Yoshinogari Historical Park. (n.d.). *History of Yoshinogari*. <https://www.yoshinogari.jp/introduction/history/> retrieved 27-12-2024

¹³ Yoshinogari Historical Park (n.d.). *Ishibōchō wa dō yatte tsukau no?* (石包丁はどうやって使うの?). <https://www.yoshinogari.jp/introduction/qa/> retrieved 27-12-2024

¹⁴ Borsotti, M. (n.d.). *A journey through history: Yayoi (Second part - Social stratification)*. Wasso Magazine, <https://www.wassoimazine.org/blog/discovering-japan/a-journey-through-history-yayoi-second-part-social-stratification> retrieved 28-12-2024

bronze and iron tool making. Symbolic of the results of two centuries of practice are the finely decorated dōtaku, bronze cast ritual bells. Cutting, slicing and piercing implements were mostly in iron, fairly simpler to cast and therefore more accessible to less skilled artisans. More artifacts unearthed at Saga's Yoshinogari provide more concrete evidence for this metallurgical advancement, including iron arrowheads, halberd blades, and sword-like weapons (see Fig.8). Significantly, these weapons prefigure although still in its rudimentary first stage the subsequent emergence of the multipurpose tōsu, which in similar fashion to the blades of Yayoi, began its journey in Japan as an imported good from China and Korea, and became the object of design experimenting for more indigenous designs. Exemplary artifacts of this item are preserved at the esteemed repository Shōsōin, in Nara. The early tōsu found here, no doubt manufactured domestically (we ought to thank Tōdaiji's record-keepers for this information), showcase experimentation with blade geometry and heat treatments, reflecting the graduation from stone-based production to a more sophisticated metallurgical tradition. These innovations not only revolutionized tool-making and weaponry but also signaled the beginning of increasingly refined approaches to forging and design that would come to be staples in the repertoire of the Kōfun and Asuka-Nara periods.



Fig.8: Iron arrow tips and Tōsu prototype from Yoshinogari

Foundation of Tōsu: the Kurohimezuka artifact

As with the archeological study of every culture, highly-valuable is what assortment of goods is found in tombs, but this statement is particularly applicable to Japan's Kōfun megalithic key-hole shaped tumuli. Their chambers feature painted decorations and an elaborate, deliberate arrangement of goods that would accompany the deceased in the Other World. The sheer size of these molds and the richness of their inner chambers speak of the increasing unified power of the centralized governments of the time and the high-regard to which the entombed were held. Among the sets of items found, the presence of iron and bronze blades holds particular significance for our research. It suggests a symbolic example of the convergence of three spheres: political authority, spiritual belief, and craftsmanship. A lack of

more concrete written evidence stops our tracks, in depicting the role of ceremonial iron blades in Kōfun Japan. But this intersection of meanings will appear with more clarity and intensity within the walls of the Imperial Courts of Heijō-kyō and Heian-kyō, where this multifaceted role of the blade will be codified in the form of a ritual. A noteworthy artifact from the 6th century is the tōsu unearthed from the Kurohimezuka Kofun in Okayama Prefecture¹⁵. Measuring 10.7 cm in length, this compact blade (see Fig.9) likely served practical purposes such as food preparation and woodworking, while its inclusion in the tumuli's inner chamber as a grave good speaks of its symbolic role in funerary rites. One more aspect to be highlighted with this early **tōsu** has to do not with its role but with its design: while it lacks the finely detailed inlays in gold, and the lacquered handles, it prefigures the subtly arched blade edge and spine of its Nara successors. It is with Kurohimezuka's tōsu that we draw a line from primitive blade designs and start tracing a trajectory that will lead us to modern knives. This continuity illustrates how tools transitioned from utilitarian objects to emblematic artifacts of Japan's material and cultural heritage.



Fig. 9: Tōsu of Okayama, unearthed from Kurohimezuka Kofun

1.3. Wheres and Whens of the multipurpose Tōsu blade

We briefly talked about tōsu and its importance in the scope of our study, and how it might be a crucial stepping stone in this journey of pinpointing key stages of development of the tradition of Japanese knives. And as with most shifts that occurred in protohistoric Japan, we have to direct our attention once again at the continent. The Nihon Shoki provides its first written record, describing the tōsu as an imported good brought from Silla's Korea, and the archeological finds, just like the one in Kurohimezuka (Fig. 9), seem to correspond in design

¹⁵ Agency for Cultural Affairs (文化庁) (n.d.). *Tōsu* (刀子). <https://bunka.nii.ac.jp/heritages/detail/397757>

Retrieved 28-12-2024

with traditional court daggers from China and Korea of the same period: the blade of the knife having a hilt wider than the scabbard. Notable for their dual functionality, they served in both a practical aspect and for daily tasks, whilst also holding symbolic significance as grave goods¹⁶. From design to use, materials to period, everything would seem to support the continental dagger theory. A multipurpose blade that serves as a marker of the social status of the living and the dead, as well as handy all purpose knife. Speaking of more practical applications, those included woodworking, tool fabrication and repair, and food preparation¹⁷.

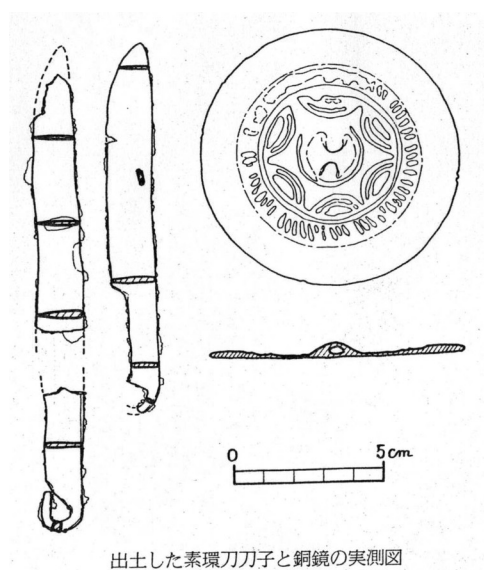


Fig. 10: Illustrations of Tōsu and scabbard, from the Nishiyakomen Site

As the transition into the Nara period was underway, tōsu underwent a process of standardization, in other words they developed a uniquely Japanese design: the awaseguchi-tōsu (合わせ口刀子), exhibited tightly fitted blades into the scabbards' aperture. Evidence from domestic sites indicates their widespread utilization in both agriculture and daily life, thus reinforcing the idea that this blade might be the first evolutionary stage, at the very origin of the modern cooking knife's genealogical tree. The presence of ring-pommeled tōsu among the end of Yayoi and Kofun artifacts, as evidenced by the Nishiyago Megumi findings, suggests that

metallurgical knowledge of how to properly temper the steel and manufacture a tight-fitting handle is proof enough that highly-skilled blacksmiths had started appearing among the ranks of the Japanese¹⁸. While definitive evidence of specific techniques employed in actual artifacts that were unearthed after centuries of corrosion remains scarce, it is plausible that the principles employed in crafting the higher end of the tōsu metalworks, found in a much more well-preserved state (that is to say ceremonial artifacts) - such as folding steel and quenching -

¹⁶ KANBAYASHI Atsuo (神林淳雄) (1934), *Tōsu ni tsuite* (刀子について), pag. 286-294

¹⁷ HAKODA S. (N. 7), pag. 182-183; OZAKI Motoharu, SATO Kanzan, (1970) *Genshoku Nihon no bijutsu dai 21-kan: Katchū to tōken* (原色日本の美術第21巻：甲冑と刀剣). Shōgakukan.

¹⁸ Mapple (n.d.). *Kumamoto no Yayoi jidai kōki de wa ippanteki ni tekki ga fukyū* (熊本の弥生時代後期では一般的に鉄器が普及) <https://www.mapple.net/articles/bk/21173/?pg=2> Retrieved 29-12-2025.

were adapted to the production of their more practical, common counterparts tōsu that would spread more widely in Nara Japan.

Tōsu's practical uses: tool crafting and culinary uses

The Tōsu were held in high esteem for their versatility, with applications found across a wide range of domains of daily life. Archaeological evidence from Nishiyago Megumi in the prefecture of Kumamoto highlights their role in the crafting of wooden farming implements. Excavations of the Yayoi pit dwellings at the site have revealed that each of the ten structures contained a tōsu, thereby emphasizing the objects' widespread use¹⁹. Tōsu, notes Hakoda²⁰, might have been at the cornerstone of communities that relied on agricultural productions, as they were likely used in crafting tools vital to the productivity of fields, such as plows. Evidence of their use in food preparation is instead provided by knife marks found on cutting boards from Yayoi and Kofun contexts, such as those excavated at Suzumei and Kanayama in Fukuoka Prefecture. Such tasks are hypothesized to have included the slicing and peeling of ingredients, which gives us an idea of how advanced the level of culinary processing of foodstuffs had gotten in the centuries right before the foundation of the Imperial Capitals. This in turn demonstrates a more complex dietary repertoire and greater care in the community of those days in the field of cuisine.

Yayoi's kitchens and tool sheds were also equipped with another weapon in their arsenal that showed how craftsmen understood more about cutting science than what we would have given credit for: sharpening whetstones. Out of the 101 whetstones found in the region of Izumi, 45 present scratches of around 1mm in width, an unmistakable sign that blades have been sharpened on their finely grained surfaces²¹. What this finding tells us is two things: that iron tools were already woven into their daily lives and that they possessed a sharp understanding of blade maintenance.

¹⁹ Mapple (n.d.), ibid

²⁰ HAKODA S., (N.7), p.183-184

²¹ YOSHIMATSU Yuki (2023), *Dai 106-wa: Toishi no sonzai* (第106話 砥石の存在). <https://shimane-kodaibunka.jp/history/history-2845/> Retrieved 29-12-2024



Fig.11: Whetstone unearthed in Shimane Prefecture, Ōtsutumi Archeological Site

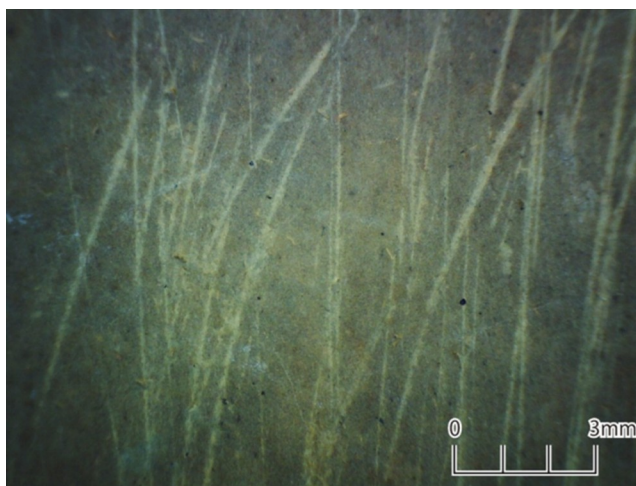


Fig. 12: Magnified view of blade marks on whetstone from Ootsutsumi Archeological site

Regional Diffusion of Tōsu

The propagation of tōsu followed distinct regional patterns, having first emerged in Kyūshū during the mid Yayoi period and steadily moving eastward. By the 8th century, tōsu had become prevalent in southern Kantō, surpassing even sickles in the frequency of finding, as Hakoda observed²². This phenomenon aligns with broader patterns of iron tool proliferation in

表1 南関東の古代遺跡からの鉄刀子と鎌の出土

遺跡 時代	久我台遺跡			作畑遺跡			将堅塚			向原遺跡		
	鎌	手鎌	刀子	鎌	手鎌	刀子	鎌	手鎌	刀子	鎌	手鎌	刀子
6世紀	1	1	2	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
7世紀	1	2	5	0	0	3	—	—	—	—	—	—
8世紀	11	1	37	1	0	3	13	0	17	2	1	7
9世紀	9	0	10	1	0	22	2	0	31	4	0	18
10世紀	2	1	7	6	0	4	—	—	—	3	0	12

資料：古庄 [13] より作成

Fig. 13: Data on Tōsu and agricultural scythes unearthed from Southern Kanto sites

²² HAKODA S., (N.7), pag. 184

Japan, driven by trade routes and local needs. A consideration of the archeological sites reveals confirmation of the trend identified by Hakoda. The Yoshinogari Site in Kyūshū is notable in this regard. Its key strategic location, as well as its size (it is by far one of the largest in Japan, both in its Yayoi and Kōfun strata) constitute substantial evidence of its two roles: one is as the main recipient of foreign influences and people, and two as bridge and starting point of main trade routes that ran throughout the country eastward.

The data from the southern Kanto sites examined appears to support the theory that Yoshinogari played a role in the eastward diffusion of tools such as tōsu. For instance, at Kugaidai in Chiba Prefecture, there is a significant increase in the number of tōsu finds, from 5 in the 7th century to 37 in the 8th century (see Fig. 13). A similar pattern was observed at Shōkotsuka in the 8th century, where 17 tōsu were unearthed alongside other iron tools. While these trends cannot prove that Yoshinogari influenced this, they suggest that innovations and tools could have spread through trade practices. The increasing presence of tōsu in these areas may have been due to the Kyūshū area acting as conduit for cultural and technological exchange.



Fig. 14: Aerial shot of the Ishigami Site, in the Asuka region

Asuka Period: the Ishigami Archeological Site findings

The late Asuka period was a time of transition and innovation, which laid the foundations for the establishment of Nara as Japan's first permanent capital. In the heart of the region from which it derives the era derived its name, excavations at the archeological site of Ishigami²³ yielded concrete evidence of blacksmithing activities: tuyères²⁴, iron slag²⁵ and forging

²³ Nara National Research Institute for Cultural Properties. (2023). *Nara National Research Institute for Cultural Properties Excavation Report*. (独立行政法人国立文化財機構奈良文化財研究所), Nara Bunkazai Kenkyūjo hakkutsu chōsa hōkoku, pag. 42-50

²⁴ Tube or pipe allowing the blowing of air into a furnace or hearth.

²⁵ By-product of smelting, welding, and other metallurgical and combustion processes from impurities in the metals or ores being treated.

flakes. Traces of blacksmithing activities paired with the finding of numerous fragments of tōsu in that same site, which date around the transition period Asuka-Nara, support the claim that craftsmen of the period were no strangers to advanced iron smelting, casting, and tempering techniques. Furthermore, these traces were unearthed 30km south to the site of the soon-to-be Imperial Capital: this might indicate that artifacts from that period were likely crafted locally. At the zenith of these technological advancement, we find the exquisite tōsu preserved in the collection of the Shōsōin of Nara.

Tōsu from the Shōsōin of Nara

The Shōsōin repository, associated with the legacy of Emperor Shōmu, houses an extensive collection of over 80 tōsu, shedding light on their roles in court during the Nara period. These knives were forged into single-edged blades and measured around 22–25 cm in length; their blades were installed on wooden magnolia handles, and often paired with custom-crafted scabbards (saya). They also featured elaborate ornamentation with lacquer, gold inlays, and intricate motifs, reflecting their dual role as both practical tools and prestigious courtly accessories, as they were meant to exhibit the status of those who were wearing them. Although they did not see much use in combat, another "battlefield" in which they saw action was the Imperial Kitchens. The Engishiki (927 CE), a Heian-period legal and administrative code, provides detailed records of earlier Nara-period practices, specifying that 77 tōsu were allocated annually for culinary use, with each knife assigned a specific purpose, from shucking oysters and slicing fish to preparing dumplings and cutting mochi:

刀子七十七枚、「十枚刺蠣料、四枚打古毛料、二枚切鰻料、二枚打加自米料、二枚打魚骨料、一枚作折餅料、一枚餛飩料、五十五枚雜用料、長廿枚、短卅五枚」

(*“Seventy-seven tōsu: ten for shucking oysters, four for pounding rice stalks, two for slicing fish, two for cutting shellfish, one for cutting mochi, one for preparing dumplings, and fifty-five for miscellaneous uses. Twenty were long, and thirty-five were short.”*)⁶

²⁶ National Museum of Japanese History (国立歴史民俗博物館), (n.d.). *Digital Engishiki Database* (デジタル延喜式). <https://khirin-t.rekihaku.ac.jp/engishiki/viewer/39#item39202310> Retrieved 3-01-2025.

The creation of such refined *tōsu* was made possible by advanced blacksmithing techniques developed during the Nara period, which, while adapting some influences from continental designs, were largely domestic innovations. Key forging methods, such as fold forging, involved repeatedly folding and hammering steel to remove impurities, resulting in a blade that was both sturdy and thin. Similarly, the soft core technique, where a core of softer more plastic steel was encased in a harder second skin of higher carbon content steel, ensured a balance of flexibility (the blade could not easily snap from force applied on its flats) and sharpness (finer, harder, long-lasting cutting edge). Although early decorative trends for *tōsu* were inspired by imported styles from Tang-Dynasty China, the craftsmanship behind their production was now distinctly Japanese. It reflected an ability to blend international influences with indigenous techniques. These methods likely influenced the production of the Shōsōin *tōsu*, ensuring they met the rigorous demands of practical use while embodying the ceremonial elegance expected in the Nara court.



Fig.14: Reproductions of a Tōsu set preserved in the Shōsōin of Nara

1.4 A knife unlike any other: The Shiki-bōchō

Where the *tōsu* symbolizes a multifunctional aspect of Japanese knives, due to its versatility in the daily tasks that court officials had to carry out, the ceremonial Shiki-bōchō was an exclusively ritual blade. It epitomized the spiritual and artistic aspirations of the court in the *hōchō-shiki*, or Ceremony of the Knife, half performance that entertained the members of the imperial family, half ritual that elevated the art of filleting to a higher spiritual realm, connected to the divine entities that populate Japan's myth of creation.

Origins in the Heian Period: Divine Cuisine and Imperial Mandate

Rooted in the very existence of the Emperor is the foundational myth of the Country: a grieving Izanagi, the divine ruler of the living, who had just lost to childbirth (kamiumi, in the myth, quite literally god birth) his wife Izanami, in order to get back into the dominion of which he was ruler had to be purified from the stench of death through a Shinto ritual, the misogi. As a byproduct of this purification ritual, the female goddess of the Sun and mythical funder of the imperial family was born. It is only natural then that the Emperor himself is by definition divine in nature. And as such, every aspects of their life had to be revisited and formalized, to be worthy of their divinity. This process included their meals. Thus the Hōchō-shiki was born. The so-called “*Ceremony of the Knife*” is a ritual first codified around the 9th century, under the reign of Emperor Seiwa. Its ideation, it is speculated, comes from the mind of Fujiwara no Yamakage, a noble court of the highest authority that covered the position of Kurodo-no-to, Head of the Chamberlain’s office, head-secretary of sorts that operated directly under the Emperor. During his office Fujiwara codified each aspect of the ceremony, from the steps to the ingredients involved, the practitioner’s garments, and lastly the tools involved, all imbued in imi (いみ), ritual purity²⁷. And as one might expect after reading the name of the ceremony, a knife was indeed at its focal center. Not any kl 図 5 <庖丁・真奈箸図>

mind you, but a ceremonial blade crafted with the only intended purpose of being used during exclusively in the hōchō-shiki. The Shiki-bōchō had a flat-tip (see Fig. 15) to prevent accidental punctures, which could “spill” impurities into the ingredients. Some knife schools, such as the Shijō-ryū (of which the above mentioned Fujiwara no Yamakage was founding father), utilized double-edged blades - highly unusual of Japanese cutlery - to represent the balance of life and death (Kaufman, 2016).²⁸ Its steel was of the purest available at the time, tamahagane, the same steel used in

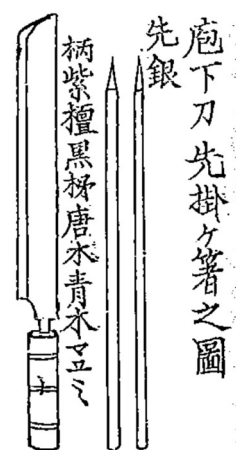


Fig. 15: Two of the three items from the Hōchō-shiki: the shikibōchō and chopsticks

²⁷ INABA Toshiaki (2007), Utsunomiya Bunsei University of Art, *Hōchō-shiki ga tsukurareta riyū* (庖丁式が作られた理由), *Bunsei kiyō* (文星紀要) (N. 19), pag. 51–64, 宇都宮: 文星芸術大学.

²⁸ Kaufman C, (2016), Knife-Wielders, and Their Audiences. P-e-r-f-o-r-m-a-n-c-e 3, r-m-a-n-c-e.org/?page_id=2483

sacred Shinto swords, these knives bore carvings of cranes, pines, or kamon²⁹ on their handles and sheaths, further emphasizing their connection with the divine.³⁰

Multiple Currents and Genealogies

As centuries passed, the Ceremony's scope and form evolved, moving away from the solely sacred function it had carried out in Heian era. Multiple schools branched out from the founding Shijō-ryū - most famously the Ikama-ryū and the ōkusa-ryū - each preserved through oral transmission, in absolute secrecy, from master to disciple. Fujiwara no Yamakage originally designated the Takahashi family as official chefs of the emperor, and only practitioners who descended from this main lineage would be allowed to partake in the ceremony. Disciples from noble or samurai families would train under Takahashi or its offshoots, eventually carrying *hōchō-shiki* beyond the imperial court into the homes of aristocrats and feudal lords³¹.

Muromachi Period: Zen Influence and new form

By the Muromachi era (1336–1573), Zen Buddhism had permeated the aristocratic sphere, and its influence permeated and shaped *hōchō-shiki* into a meditative performance, with prescribed forms that dictated the shape of the knife as well as the motions, and ingredients involved. The Encyclopedia of Japanese Cuisine, published in 1898, describes one of the kata called “Eternal Carp,” where the knife and the long “manabashi” chopsticks had to be crossed over the head of the practitioner before beginning the carving of the fish. A gesture that symbolized bridging the mortal realm with the divine³², a stark contrast to the pragmatic slicing of everyday kitchen work that was occurring in behind the curtains of the imperial kitchen. The resulting ceremony blurred the line between martial discipline and culinary ritual, reflecting the Muromachi pursuit of mindful precision.

²⁹ Japanese family clans emblems

³⁰ INABA T. (2007), (n. 27), pag. 8

³¹ INABA T. (2007), *ibid*, pag. 3

³² Kaufman C. (2016), (n.28)

Edo Period: Decline into Aristocratic Spectacle

Under Tokugawa rule, the once-sacred practice of hōchō-shiki began losing its ties with the purity that was so central during the Heian era. The growing urban culture, combined with a focus on aesthetics for entertainment, turned the ceremony into a lavish exhibition for the entertainment value of the wealthy. Ornamental knives with dragon or cherry blossom engravings became fashionable showpieces.³³ Moreover, mass-produced steel gradually replaced the tamahagane, finally eroding whatever trace of the divine was left (Kumakura, 2007, p. 56). By the late Edo period, akin to flower arranging (ikebana) or the tea ceremonies, the hōchō-shiki had become a shadow of its former divine self, an art form no longer tied to its original intent.

図7 <庖丁式衣装図・直垂>



国立国会図書館蔵 訓蒙図 (寛政元年刊)

Fig. 16: Kansei-era (18th century) depiction of the clothing and tool set of a knife ceremony

Modern Revival: Ritual as Living Heritage

The hōchō-shiki may have lost its nature and intent, but this did not stop its practice, which reached even contemporary Japan. As part of a larger maneuver to preserve the millenary national culinary heritage, the Takabe Shrine in Minamiboso (Chiba prefecture), also due to its housing the God of cooking, reenacts the foundational Shijō-ryū hōchō-shiki 3 times a year. The performance follows Fujiwara no Yamakage's codification to a t, just as if it were Heian era: the practitioner works his way through filleting a fish, using only three items - an elevated cutting board (大俎板, おおまないた), long cooking chopsticks and a ceremonial knife. This last item is a hand-crafted reproduction of the original Heian-era design, with a flat tip, and with engraved spiritual motifs.³⁴



Fig. 17: A reenactment of hōchō-shiki at Takabe Shrine, in Chiba prefecture

³³ INABA T. (2007), (n.27), pag. 10

³⁴ Takabe Shrine HP (n.d.), Hōchō-shiki (庖丁式). <https://takabejinja.com/houchoushiki.html> 5-01-2025

1.5 Bridging the Sacred and the Practical

While tōsu in Nara Japan often served multipurpose roles - functioning as both everyday implements and status markers - the shiki-bōchōin the Heian and subsequent eras became dedicated vehicles of divine significance. This contrast highlights the divergence between practical multipurpose knives and strictly ceremonial tools, setting the stage for the branching paths that cooking knives will enter. As Japan shifted toward a warrior-class ethos, blades and cuisine alike took on new forms that emphasized efficiency, sober aesthetics, and the martial values of discipline and focus. This would mark the departure of these culinary tools from the realm of the divine and ceremonial. In the next chapter, we will explore how this warrior influence reshaped knife design.

Kamakura and Muromachi design: the heeled knife makes its first appearance

On the one hand, the tōsu courtly knife was gradually fading into the background, with the shift in power and authority from the Imperial court to the military tent regime of Kamakura's Nakuru, a new system of values took their place. This shift was reflected in the design of knives, which started adapting to the utilitarian demands of a rising warrior class. Iron became a more accessible and widespread resource, thanks to improved trading routes, and the necessity for each region's clan to arm itself, as larger scale domestic conflicts increased in frequency. A democratization of the cooking knife followed.

The Kitano Tenjin Emaki: Bridging Heian Purity to Kamakura Upheaval

During the Heian era, the three-item set - consisting of a katana shaped knife, an elevated cutting board, and long metal chopsticks - symbolized ritual purity and imperial sophistication. In formal ceremonies, such as the hōchōshiki, direct contact with meat or fish was discouraged, if not even considered taboo; the chopsticks allowed chefs to handle ingredients without touching them by hand, while the glittering knife edge was more about visual refinement than practical efficiency³⁵. A Kamakura-era illustrated scroll known as the Kitano Tenjin Engi Emaki (c. 1219) offers a strikingly different depiction of these same implements. In one scene from its Rokudōe section, we can spot a 3-items set, with which we are now fairly familiar.

³⁵ HAKODA S. (2021), (n.7), pag. 191-3

“This is one of the pictures of hell ... in which an oni has placed a dead man upon a chopping board and is cutting him into pieces. Chopping boards were used when cooking fish or meat. References to chopping boards for preparing fish or birds appear in the Utsuho monogatari and Konjaku monogatarihū. ... Cooking chopsticks ... held in the left hand to secure ingredients while cutting with a katana-gata knife in the right. This suggests that directly touching food with one’s hands was uncommon.”³⁶



Fig. 18: A demon chopping down a prisoner with a katana shaped knife, scene from the Rokudōe, Kitanotenjin Emaki

This subversion of this depiction - a demon, roughly using a knife that once was emblematic of imperial sophistication and ritual purity - graphically renders how the roles of power had started changing. As warrior clans asserted dominance over the court, tools formerly reserved for lofty ceremonies found usage in harsher, more pragmatic contexts. Far from Heian aristocracy’s emphasis on purity, the same knife, board, and chopsticks became reminders that power now lay in the hands of a new ruling class.

Archaeological Insights: The Democratization of Iron Tools

From art to artifact, we now will have a look at what findings the excavations at the Kusado Sengen Site yielded. It is a riverine settlement active from the 13th to 17th centuries, which shed light on the democratization of knives. Over 280 sword-shaped knives (categorized as “katana-gata-bōchō”) have been unearthed together with an exemplar prototype of the ago-tsuki bōchō, a cooking knife featuring a curved heel at the base of the blade, and with an ergonomic wooden handle.³⁷ This design minimized the strain on the wrist, allowing for repeated chopping motions while anchoring the knuckles on a cutting board. A circular wooden cutting board from the same site exhibits the sorts of cutting signs that such a blade would leave, especially after years of use. To complete the set, whetstones of varying grades,

³⁶ An overview of Kitano Tenjin Emaki, 2021, p.139

³⁷

from coarse to finishing, were also found, indicating that local communities had landed on 3 staple items for ① processing their food efficiently (heeled knife), on ② a stable workspace (circular cutting board), with ③ regards paid to maintenance (whetstones).³⁸ This bundle of evidence not only aligns with the daily diets of commoners and lower-ranking samurai, centered on preserved fish, grains, and vegetables³⁹; but also matches perfectly with what modern professionals of the knife would hold in their cabinet. One more takeaway is that robust trade routes were established - which allowed blacksmiths to source iron rapidly, establish a workshop, and take in apprentices. We will explore the factors behind it in the next section.



Fig. 19: Wooden cutting board, from the Kusado Sengen Site



Fig. 20: Heeled knife, prototype to the modern Japanese all-purpose knife, from the Kusado Sengen Site

War as a force of change

The Kamakura regime was overthrown in 1333, and with the quick rise to power of the Ashikaga in 1336, we entered the Muromachi period, which takes its name from the district in Kyoto where Ashikaga Takauji would establish his bakufu. Warfare and political fragmentation were the forces at play here, the source of new opportunities and change in society. One of these changes worth going over is the spread of Zen Buddhism among the masses. Monks like Eisai and Dōgen popularized the doctrine, which had elaborated a strict

³⁸ Hiroshima Prefectural Museum of History (2009), *Chūsei: Kusado Sengen tanken* (中世・草戸千軒探検), *Hiroshima Kenritsu Rekishi Hakubutsukan Nyūsu* (広島県立歴史博物館ニュース), 79. <https://www.pref.hiroshima.lg.jp/uploaded/attachment/240734.pdf> 6-01-2025

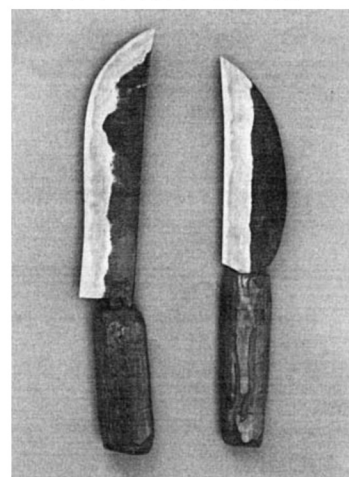
³⁹ HAKODA S. (2021), (n. 7), pag. 198-9

vegetarian diet, rooted in spiritual discipline, Shōjin-ryori.⁴⁰ Since meat was considered spiritually polluting (impure flesh and blood tainted the soul) use of manabashi, the long chopsticks that we met in our section on the Ceremony of Knife, became less relevant. Instead, communities needed an effective knife designed, ergonomic, and efficient at processing large volumes of vegetables, the new staple that the Zen diet professed. The heeled knife met these demands perfectly: it offered precise control and reduced hand fatigue, essential for repetitive tasks like mincing daikon or shredding cabbage. Meanwhile, warrior pragmatism fueled further acceptance of such knives, as Sengoku warlords gradually dismissed the idea of overly refined imperial cuisine, favoring simple, hearty fare that required practical tools.⁴¹

Path to Edo-era design specialization

Blacksmiths around the country started picking up the addition of a heel at the blade of a knife, and cooks appreciated its functionality. Its popularity was widespread around Japan, as we approached the end of the Muromachi period. At excavation sites unearthed more and more heel-equipped knives, that seem to corroborate the theory supporting this expanding trend. An exemplary ago-tsuki-bōchō, paired with a cutting board bearing similar cutting marks to what was found in Kusado Sengen, is the key find of Motojima Site, in Shizuoka prefecture; a more interesting artifact is found in the Sonbo-Asakura Archeological Park, what would be known today as a kuro-uchi laminated steel knife, which features a white glimmering polished blade edge, the spine's steel black, as it was left unpolished during its heat-treatment. This feature tells us more: blacksmiths had been playing around with techniques from sword-making, and translated them into tool-making. Both artifacts from the above sites present in fact a feature that had been exclusive to katanas up until then, a ridge line (or shinogi), which indicates where the soft steel ends, and as it tapers down to the cutting edge, where the harder steel begins.

図 (18) 曾万布の包丁の再現



資料：加藤 [6] p.12

Fig. 21: A reconstruction of a kurouchi cooking knife, Sonbo Site

⁴⁰ HAKODA S. (2021), (n.7), pag. 195

⁴¹ Martin, A. K. (2007), *Edomae: Food and the city in Tokugawa Japan*, University of Hawaii at Manoa

As Martin Colcutt⁴² notes, the Kamakura and Muromachi eras were marked by imperial decline, warrior dominance, and burgeoning trade networks that reshaped Japan's social and economic fabric. The once-rigid boundaries between imperial rituals and common usage blurred; knives and cutting boards moved from the exclusive sphere of courtly ceremony into the everyday realities of monasteries, encampments, and towns. Where Heian culture elevated the three-item set as emblems of spiritual purity, the Kamakura–Muromachi transition saw these implements adapted - or even subverted - by a society in flux. Local blacksmiths and expanded trade gave rise to the ergonomic heeled-knife, while Zen's vegetarian Shōjin-ryōri spurred its broad adoption. By the end of Japan's middle age, the stage was set for the Edo era's more specialized culinary toolkit and the rise of regional blacksmithing hubs. In the next chapter, we will see how these medieval developments influenced the birth of today's powerhouses of Japanese knife-making. The ritual roots endure in certain ceremonial contexts, but the tools themselves now speak to a hybrid heritage: forged from a warrior's pragmatism, Zen mindfulness, and a courtly refinement.



Fig. 22: daily-life tools, such as the all-purpose knife, being depicted in period emaki (Shuhanron Emaki. 16th century)

1.6 Forging the Future: From Medieval Craft to Edo's New Life

As the Edo period (1603–1868) dawned, two regions in particular emerged as blacksmithing hubs of the country - Sakai and Seki. Drawing on strategic locations, forging techniques passed down from centuries of katana and tool making, and the evolving demands of an urbanizing population. Following the unification policies of Oda Nobunaga and Toyotomi Hideyoshi, Tokugawa Ieyasu established a stable governance that triggered unprecedented urban growth. Metropolitan centers like Edo (Tokyo's old name), Osaka, and Kyoto swelled with merchants, artisans, and samurai who had now departed from rural life. This lively urban environment created an expansive market for specialized culinary knives. An unprecedented

⁴² Colcutt, M. (2003). *Japan's medieval age: The Kamakura & Muromachi periods*. Japan Society. https://aboutjapan.japansociety.org/japans_medieval_age_the_kamakura_muromachi_periods 7-01-2025

culinary expansion was exhibited in the newly formed town streets, enlivened by street vendors, tea houses, and sushi stalls. Edomae's area is an exemplary recipient of these changes. Demand for durable, affordable and specialized blades rose. The Tokugawa regime invested in an expansion of trading routeways, building on what good was done during the middle-age in that merit, and streamlined the movement of raw materials and finished goods.⁴³ Iron from the Chūgoku Mountains was being now funneled in the rising forging centers of Sakai, while Seki profited from its position at the center of trading routes running throughout the whole country. Collectively, these factors fostered a national network that linked resources, craftsmanship, and end-users—a key precursor to Japan's eventual modern industrial economy.

We now move into Chapter 2, where we specifically target the two regions of Sakai and Seki, and explore how these two forging centers navigated the Tokugawa era's economic currents, from their origins in the Medieval era. What role did the trade guilds have in matching demand with supply? In what way did they provide the conditions for these two regional clusters to flourish? And what are the common points, and points of difference, between Sakai knife-making and Seki? These questions guide our investigation into the respective legacies of Sakai's artisanal excellence, and Seki's characteristic industrial approach, and provide an historical groundwork for future analysis of their modern states.

⁴³ Martin A. K. (2007), (n. 41)

Chapter 2: an historical analysis of blacksmithing regional clusters, Sakai and Seki

2.1 Sakai Prologue

Today's Sakai City is a comfortable 10-minute train ride to the south of Osaka's main station. The city, while it does not come to mind when thinking of big Japanese metropolis, is among the most populated urban areas of the country (counting a population of 900.000 people⁴⁴), and is a leading industrial area for the country, which hosts everything from petrochemicals, energy, metals, and machinery related industries.



Fig. 23: the Mozu Furuichi Kofun group, a UNESCO world heritage site

Nestled in the southern bay area of Osaka city, historically, it served as its main port since its beginnings in the 16th century. Furthermore, the area can pride a deep connection to Japan's more ancient roots, with its Mozu-Furuichi Kofun Group, a group of over 40 mounded tombs distributed in an area of 2km in the heart of the city.⁴⁵ It is inside these humongous tombs that we find the first traces of metallurgical activities in the area, and therefore, where we ought to take our first step in what we will discover is a millenary craft passed down from craftsman to craftsman. The aim is to trace Sakai's transformation as a central blacksmithing hub, emphasizing how its geographical advantage, capability to adapt techniques over many metalwork crafts, and socio-economic shifts quite literally forged its identity as a bastion of Japanese traditional craftsmanship, an identity that is still preserved in today's workshops and has positioned the region as the prime artisanal cooking knives manufacturer in the country.

Kofun traces of metalwork activities, and first craftsman groups

The first traces of metalworking activities in the area can be found in Sakai's Moated City Ruins, the Mozu-Furuichi Kofun group. Unearthed from these sites are the usual suspects:

⁴⁴ Sakai City (n.d.). *Sakai City population 2020*. https://www.citypopulation.de/en/japan/osaka/_/27140_sakai/ Retrieved 9-01-2025

⁴⁵ UNESCO World Heritage Centre (n.d.), *Mozu-Furuichi Kofun Group: Mounded Tombs of Ancient Japan*. <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1593/> 9-01-2025

metal tools for construction, iron ceremonial daggers, and other implements of a similar nature.⁴⁶ The sheer quantity of kofun in the area suggests that early metalworking groups may have been active in these centuries already. By the Heian period, local Buddhist temples's demand for construction tools, as well as ritual and more practical metalwork (iron nails, temple bells), allowed these same groups to hone their alloying and casting techniques. While technical records are sparse and almost inaccessible without groundwork, Kitada guesses that concentration around temples “fostered knowledge-sharing systems, similar to craft guilds.” Another factor that stimulated groups of smiths to gather in the area is its proximity to accessible, high-quality natural resources, like soil suitable for casting and forging, and Kawachi charcoal, prized even today by knife makers as it produces the cleanest flame.⁴⁷

Medieval Flourishing (12th–16th Century)

It was around the 12th century that Sakai started to make a name for itself, in the literal sense of the expression: its geographical position at the border (Sakai means “border”) of the other three provinces (Settsu, Kawachi, and Izumi), was likely what gave it its name. It was also a popular stop for pilgrims headed to Kumano and a famous salt-baths location among nobles. It is no surprise then that significantly sized settlements started developing and growing in size, as we approached the end of Kamakura's bakufu, in 1336.⁴⁸

Demands for metal tools and swords escalated quickly with the warring years of the Sengoku era. Access to higher-quality iron resources was facilitated by transportation routes that reached Sakai through the Seto Inland Sea, instituted with the efforts of local daimyō Ouchi Yoshihiro (1356-1400) of the Ashikaga clan. The Ōnin War (1467-1477), the beginning of intense wartime brought more favorable conditions to blacksmiths: the so-called sūuchimono (すうちもの 数打物) - mass-produced unrefined blades - flooded the market as every daimyō of country rushed to blacksmithing centers for these blades so vital to their conflicts.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ KITADA Hōzō (1996), *Dentō gijutsu ni tsuite: Sakai hōchō* (伝統技術について 堺庖丁). http://www.jshit.org/kaishi_bn1/10_1kitada.pdf (Original manuscript received 10-041995; revised version accepted 2-07-1996)

⁴⁷ KITADA H. (1995), *ibid*

⁴⁸ KITADA H. (1995), *ibid*

⁴⁹ Furukawa Hamono (n.d.). *Hamono no rūtsu* (刃物のルーツ). <https://www.frkw.com/index002.html> 10-01-2025.



Fig. 24: A traditional さかいきよく 堺極
tobacco-knife

In 1543, the shipwreck of Portuguese traders in southern Kyūshū's Tanegashima Island made ripples that would dramatically change domestic warfare. Sakai merchant Tachibana-ya Matazaburō⁵⁰ was the first to reach the island, learn the ways of matchlock gun manufacture, and bring it back to Sakai, spurring its adoption.⁵¹ Tanegashima's forging boom was short-lived, as Japan would enter its most peaceful centuries not long after under Tokugawa's rule. What left a long-lasting impact was a forging method from said tanegashimas - rolling and welding a heated iron strip to the long barrel of the gun - applied to sword and knife-making: this technique was remarkably similar to advanced lamination methods in knives.⁵² Conveniently, a unified and peaceful Japan would also create the perfect conditions for a shift in the market's demand towards more daily life-oriented metal goods, such as razors, gardening shears, and agricultural knives. Most notable was the demand for the tabako-bōchō⁵³, or tobacco knife. A knife specialized in shredding tobacco leaves, designed in Sakai, but it is unclear whether under a direct commission of Toyotomi Hideyoshi himself, an avid enjoyer of tobacco, or if the product of a wild prediction that tobacco's demand would soon boom from a local swordsmith. ⁵⁴ In either case, the tobacco knife quickly became Sakai's most requested knife and spread across the country along with the 堺極 stamp, which ensured

⁵⁰ Meiji University Museum (n.d.). *Yūmei na teppō kaji/seisan-chi* (有名な鉄砲鍛冶・生産地), <https://www.meihaku.jp/arquebus-basic/famous-gun-blacksmith/> 11-01-2025

⁵¹ Sakai City Government (n.d.), *Dentō no keishō: Rekishi • Bunka Sakai* (伝統の継承 歴史・文化 堺), <https://www.city.sakai.lg.jp/kanko/sakai/keisho/index.html> 10-01-2025

⁵² KITADA H. (1996), (n.46), pag. 4-6

⁵³ Sakai Tourism and Convention Bureau (n.d.). *Chūsei no Sakai wa bunka • gijutsu no hasshinchi – Mono no hajimari nandemo Sakai – Tabako bōchō* (中世の堺は文化・技術の発信地 ものの始まりなんでも堺 煙草包丁), <https://www.sakai-tcb.or.jp/about-sakai/origin/main.html> 11-01-2025.

⁵⁴ KITADA H. (1996), (n.46)

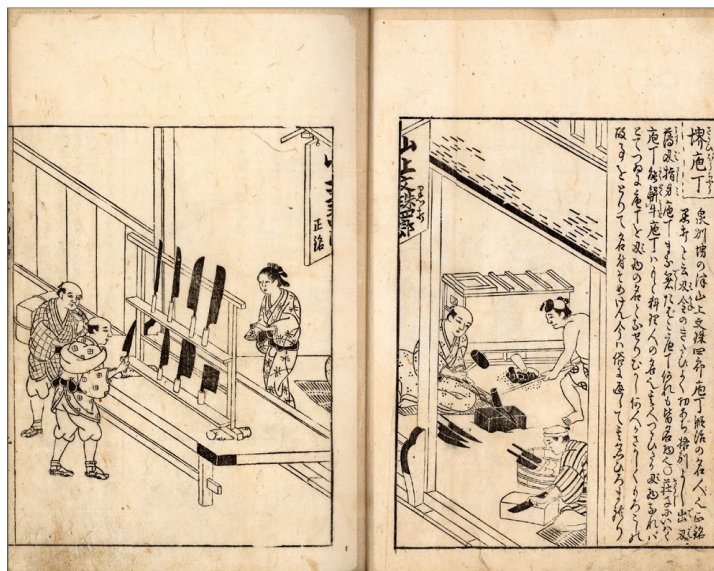


Fig. 25: an 18th century illustrated book introduces Sakai knives as of the highest quality - "Nihon Sankai Meibutsu Zue" (Illustrated Famous Products of the Mountains and Seas of Japan) (1754, Tessai Hirase, Mitsunobu Hasegawa)

the product's origin and uncontested Sakai quality. In parallel guilds of wholesalers (in Japanese, ton'ya 問屋), that acted as bridges between makers and demand, also rose in riches and authority: they dictated products' standardized measuring - shaku (尺) and sun (寸), respectively 30.03 and 3.03 centimeters - still in use in today's more traditional Sakai cutleries, and provided all sorts of capital investment services that a workshop might have needed. They regulated prices, held stock of resources, handled orders, and checked the quality of knives that got into the market with measures like the 堺極 (sakai-kyoku). But I digress, what had happened with cooking knives after the tumultuous era of firearms and tobacco and domestic conflicts? Period texts, like the *Nihon Sankai Meibutsu Sue* (1754), which introduces each region's local specialty, of Sakai praises "exceptionally sharp, black-forged knives". Their blade shapes and handle designs are also showcased in that same 18th-century text, and we are presented with the same wa-bōchō (和包丁, Japanese-style knife) that populate today's knife stores. We can easily spot from the illustration some of the more emblematic ones of Sakai cutlery: the sashimi slicer Yanagiba, a Suica-bōchō, a watermelon knife, and the tobacco knife we encountered earlier. A design feature that Sakai knives have adapted from the Nara tōsu and perfected is the single-edged design (片刃, kataba): the asymmetry of the blade's edge allowed perfect cuts that preserved the ingredients' essence, its umami (旨味). Another account instead, extracted from Osaka's historical records, provides a name for Sakai's first deba knife craftsman: "Around the Kan'ei era (1624–1643), Monju Shirō, known

as a blacksmith from Yamanoue, began producing kuro-uchi deba hōchō (black-forged deba knives)".

「寛永ノ頃・文殊四朗某山ノ上鍛冶ト唱、黒打出刃包丁ヲ始」「堺問屋商況提率表・諸金物問屋」, 『大阪経済史料集成』第5巻, 大阪商工会議所, 1974)⁵⁵

Sakai knives were given praise and a worthy stage to perform in, in the form of the neighboring Osaka, now known as the “*tenka no daidokoro*”⁵⁶, the Nation’s Kitchen, as all sorts of foodstuff were first processed (with Sakai knives), stored, and then transported through maritime waterways to Edo, the new political and culinary capital 17th century Japan. It is only natural that when a hit product appears in the market, competitors start to copy it and beat it in a price war: at the changing of the century, Banshū’s Miki, Sanjō’s Echigo, and Mino’s Seki are all regions that rose to challenge up until that point undisputed quality of Sakai cooking and tobacco knives, with 偽庖丁 (nise-bōchō, or counterfeit knives) sold at a much lower price than the original Sakai’s. By the end of the 18th century, Sakai’s knife dominance was being threatened; historical records deposited at Sakai’s Magistrate Office in the Hōreki and An’ei era (respectively, 1763, and 1772) report as follows:

「近年他所二而打出し候者八、兼て私共売先キを直段二而売崩し候様二仕候」
(“In recent years, producers from other regions have entered the market, and they are undercutting our prices, disrupting our established customer base.”)

(Imabashiya Yaichiro, account deposited at the Sakai Magistrate, 1763) (translation by the author)

「当所鍛冶共難渋仕候、其基ハ他所外鍛冶之者共猥リニたハコ庖丁打出シ、私共売先キ妨ケ候段」

(“Local blacksmiths are struggling, primarily due to external producers recklessly introducing tobacco knives, disrupting our sales channels.”) (translation by the author)

⁵⁵ Osaka Chamber of Commerce and Industry (1974). *Ōsaka keizai shiryō shūsei* (『大阪経済史料集成』) (Vol. 5). 大阪商工会議所; follows the romaji transliteration “Kan’ei era (1624–1643), Monju Shirō yamanoe kaji to tonae, kuro-uchi deba hōchō o hajime”

⁵⁶ 天下の台所

大分類	中分類	価額 (円)	構成比	主要産物
農産物	米穀類	2,787,489	51.8%	米 2,349,465 円、麦 359,712 円
	種子類	272,938	5.1%	菓子 230,335 円、綿子 42,036 円
	園産類	96,398	1.8%	薩摩芋 59,110 円、蘿蔔 13,708 円
	綿類	476,161	8.8%	綿 476,161 円
	製茶・煙草類	32,528	0.6%	茶 20,277 円、煙草 12,251 円
	その他	18,506	0.3%	果実類 14,707 円
山・林産物	竹・木材等	8,006	0.1%	木材 4,545 円
	薪・炭・紙	20,626	0.4%	薪炭 14,876 円
	玉石鉱土類	6,724	0.1%	
海産物	魚類	16,827	0.3%	
畜産物	禽獣類	5,159	0.1%	
	小 計	3,741,360	69.5%	
工産物	醸造物	365,043	6.8%	酒 252,494 円、醬油・味噌 100,651 円
	油類	144,324	2.7%	菓子油 132,266 円、綿子油 8,743 円、蠟燭 5,750 円
	食物類	147,082	2.7%	砂糖 82,799 円、米豆腐 25,340 円
	金属細工・諸器械類	84,009	1.6%	煙草庖丁 35,003 円、出刃庖丁 7,812 円、手鋏 998 円、鉄砲 760 円、農具 11,564 円、大鋸 1,800 円、煙管 1,725 円、人力車 12,800 円、荷車 4,450 円
	木綿糸・織綿	39,406	0.7%	木綿糸 24,680 円、織綿 14,726 円
	絲織物類	547,216	10.2%	白木綿 282,038 円、絹木綿 77,967 円、真田 149,898 円、紋羽 28,265 円
	生糸・蚕卵紙類	3,377	0.1%	
	化粧品類	15,059	0.3%	櫛 14,054 円
	線香	9,023	0.2%	
	染料・塗具類	8,425	0.2%	
	陶器類	52,175	1.0%	瓦 20,140 円、煉瓦石 20,905 円
	家具類	18,587	0.3%	
	桶樽類	87,453	1.6%	酒造桶 76,014 円
	履物類	51,600	1.0%	
	肥料・飼料	51,116	0.9%	油粕 30,117 円、綿種油粕 9,951 円
	紙類	5,141	0.1%	
	その他	15,772	0.3%	
	小 計	1,644,806	30.5%	
合 計		5,386,167	100.0%	

(注)『明治 7 年府県物産表』より作成。

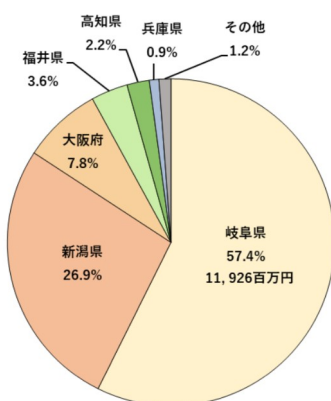
Fig. 26: Sakai's industrial output in 1874, with knife production only appearing as a small voice, in the 金属細工 section

Competing regions' threat did not wane down and was followed by new drastic changes implemented in the country's socio-economic structure. With the arrival of black ships from the States at Shimoda in 1853 and the tumults that followed and led to Meiji's restoration, Japan pivoted towards intense industrialization. Railways, shipping lines, telegraph networks, and entirely new industries (textiles, chemicals, cement) were instituted in just a few decades. This process challenged the artisanal spirit and values that Sakai had built in the past centuries: in 1871 the abolition of feudal guilds dismantled centuries-old structures, compelling smiths to form cooperatives like the Sakai Cutlery and Industrial Cooperative Association Federation (1881), a collective attempt at keeping pace with modernization. Simultaneously, great quantity of European steel was being imported from countries like Sweden, known for its high-quality, mass-produced carbons steel, and this destabilized traditional practices. Foreign steel was different in every aspect from the domestic tamahagane, particularly in its production method: where western blast furnaces were oriented towards mass production, and therefore low costs, the Japanese tatara was not. The latter, while it produced much purer steel, was heavily dependent on manual work, and was therefore overshadowed soon. The Western Steel Technical Council, instituted in 1880, planned to accelerate this transition to a steel production method worthy of Modern Japan. It provided standardized methods of steel manufacturing, as well as guidelines on forging

methods; despite these efforts, many traditional knife workshops did not, or refused to keep up, and inevitably were shuttered.⁵⁷

Be that the sector was not nearly as significant as other industries in the same Sakai industrial zone - Sakai Prefecture's figures from the 7th year of Meiji show knife production constituted a mere 1.6% of the region's total industrial output - or that it was outdone by historical competitors, like Seki, no significant data related to the pre-war knife industry was made available. We jump forward to 2020, and these are the states of national shipments of cooking knives abroad: Gifu Prefecture (57%) and Nigata Prefecture (27%) lead the country's output of knives, with Osaka's Sakai lagging behind at a measly 7%.⁵⁸ What the raw figures do not tell is how Sakai was able to carve its own niche in modern knife making, with an approach to the product that takes pride in traditional manufacturing methods and renowned quality not only in domestic, high-caliber sushi restaurants but all over the culinary world. Thanks to the efforts to revive Sakai's identity of excellence, like the 1982 National Traditional Craft designation⁵⁹, Sakai knives were bestowed the recognition of UNESCO-acclaimed heritage.

■包丁出荷額の全国シェア（令和2年）



出典：「令和3年度 関市の工業」より引用及びグラフ作成

Fig. 27: Cooking knives' export figures, from the Nagoya Customs, fiscal year 2020

We will see in the coming Chapter 4 in more detail, what makes Sakai's trademark uchi-hamono (hammer-forging) stand out as a manufacturing method for its undeniable mechanical merits and cultural significance as a know-how passed down many generations of blacksmiths.

⁵⁷ Kawamura Akimasa (2006), *Dentōteki sangyō: Sakai hamonogyō no mukashi to ima* (伝統的産業・堺刃物業の昔と今), 専修大学商学部, pag. 56

⁵⁸ Nagoya Customs (名古屋税関) (2022), *Hamon shukka jiszeki suii* (刃物出荷実績推移), *Nagoya Zeikan Chōsabu Chōsātōkeika* 名古屋税関調査部調査統計課.

⁵⁹ Sakai Densan (堺伝産) (n.d.), "Sakai uchihamono" ga Tsūshō Sangyō Daijin yori "dentōteki kōgeihin" ni shitei (「堺打刃物」が通商産業大臣より「伝統的工芸品」に指定), <https://www.sakaidensan.jp/crafts/knife> 12-01-2025

2.2 Seki Prologue: The Bellows Festival

If you were to visit the modest city of Seki on an unsuspecting November 8th and head to the city's Swordsmith Museum, a rather peculiar sight would welcome you. Shinto priests solemnly recite their benedictions to multiple stacks of bright yellow recycling boxes filled to the brim with razors, gardening shears, hunting knives, cutters, and cooking knives. The 8th of November, you would later discover, is the city's Hamono Kuyou-sai (刃物供養祭), or Festival of



Fig. 28: Shinto priests, as they ritually bid one last farewell to the soon-to-be retired knives, scissors, etc..

Blades⁶⁰, if we were to take some liberty in translating the original Japanese. Kuyou (供養) originates from the Sanskrit “puja,” the act of revering gods, ancestors, or (in recent history) their belongings, daily goods that range from nan’s favorite pocket mirror to that one knife pop’s cared for as if it were a puppy. In the case of Seki, this sentiment is particularly strong towards blades that accompany everyone’s daily life - shaving razors, pruning shears, and cooking knives, most of which are likely produced in Seki itself. Over 40.000 of these items - either unused or broken beyond repair - are collected from every Japanese prefecture and sent back to Seki city, receive well-earned thanks and prayers, and are then to be either reused or recycled. This festival alone would be enough evidence to tell that, here in Seki, the connection with bladed toolmaking is deeply woven with the town’s history. At the heart of the festivities stands the Motoshige Memorial Stone (元重翁之碑^{もとしげおうこれ}), where blacksmiths and townspeople gather to pay homage to the legendary founder of Seki’s sword-smithing tradition, Motoshige. ⁶¹ Offerings of bright orange mandarins - a symbol of longevity, and of fiery steel heated in forges - are piled high, while the community chants one last *otsukaresama!* - *good work out there!* - to retired knives. It is a ceremony that neatly encapsulates Seki’s duality: a place where reverence for the past fuels innovation for the future.

⁶⁰ Oh! Matsuri. (n.d.). *Gifu Hamono Kuyō-sai* (岐阜刃物供養祭). <https://ohmatsuri.com/ja/articles/gifu-hamono-kuyo-sai> 13-01-2025

⁶¹ Oh! Matsuri (n.d.), *ibid*

Motoshige: Myth, Memory, and the Birth of Mino-Den

Our journey through Seki Knives begins in myth. According to local lore, Motoshige, a smith fleeing the decline of Nara's temple workshops in the late Kamakura period (1185–1333), migrated to Seki and established the Mino-den (美濃伝), one of the five great schools of Japanese sword-smithing.⁶² The tradition of offering mandarines and reciting prayers for a safe year for craftsmen can be originally traced to a 16th-century ritual that celebrated the Shinto deity of metals, Kanayama-Hiko-no-kami (かなやまひこのかみ 金山彦神).⁶³ But historians are quite divided on the topic: while genealogies and festivals may celebrate Motoshige as the founding father of Seki's crafts, Sugiura (杉浦, 2010) argues that Motoshige might have been just one out of a multitude of blacksmiths, who moved to the area during Kamakura era, sensing a better chance for their business in the new area. "Motoshige's historicity is less a fact than a cultural necessity," notes Ishisaki (石崎, 2013), "a symbol of collective resilience for a community built on borrowed resources and borrowed time." here, Ishisaki likely refers to Mino's reliance on external factors - iron coming from other regions through trade, and demand for its local specialty (swords) which heavily relies on conflicts to occur. Whether an invented tradition or a historical figure, Motoshige's existence allowed the smiths of the time and future generations *to build an identity, a sense of legitimacy, and a community around his legend*.

While not entirely peaceful, late Kamakura Japan experienced relative stability, allowing economic activity to surge in the area that we today know as Seki City: situated right at the key intersection of branch routes - Hida Kaidō and Kiso river Nishi Kōdō - of the Tōsandō (a transportation route, that connected landlocked areas to the sea) and the road linking Owari to Gujō, ensuring Seki's access to timber and charcoal vital to blacksmithing. In other words, Seki became a focal trading hub, connecting the Sea of Japan to its eastern areas, a checkpoint - in Japanese, sekisho (関所) - of goods and people, merchants and craftsmen. By the late Kamakura period, the name *Seki* (written as 関) appeared in written records, cementing its

⁶² MORIOKA Takafumi (森岡孝文) (. Formation, Decline, Regeneration of the District Producing Cutlery in Seki-City (関市刃物産地の形成, 衰退, 再生). Keiei Joho Gakubu Ronshu, Vol. 30, No. 1/2, June 2016.

⁶³

identity as a linchpin of medieval trade.⁶⁴ The establishment of a checkpoint system facilitated the collection of taxes, and ensured that critical resources - iron sand, and charcoal - would safely transition under the watchful eye of the local authorities (Sugiura, 2010).

Resource Scarcity and Trade Networks

But let us take a step back and answer the following question: is that high-quality iron so vital to spark the legend of Mino-den swordsmithing, where did it come from, and how did it get there? While Japan may not be a land blessed with abundant iron ore deposits, what it does have is iron sand, which can be found flowing in most rivers around the country. A particularly notorious region for iron-rich rivers is Okuizumo (奥出雲), located in present-day Shimane Prefecture. Records from the Izumo-no-Kuni-Fūdoki (出雲国風土記, 773) describe the region's iron to be exceptionally hard and well-studied for tool and sword-making. From the Izumo's dense forest, locals would gather high-quality pine-wood charcoal (松炭, Matsuzumi), employed in fueling the tatara, a traditionally Japanese iron smelting furnace, and turn that iron sand (砂鉄, Satetsu) in the swordsmiths prized tamahagane steel. This tamahagane, once the impurities were removed, would be refined in easy-to-transport lumps of steel, reach via riverboats, cattle and merchant ships nearby distribution centers, like the one up north of Yasugi. From there, it would enter the countrywide trade network, making its way to final destinations like Osaka's Sakai, and Seki. By the Edo period, over 80% of Japan's iron production came from the Chūgoku mountains, with Oku-Izumo at the core of this operation. Here, self-sufficient iron-smelting communities called *Yamato* (山内) sustained large-scale production of tamahagane and pig iron, sustaining not only swordsmithing and all sorts of metalwork (Japan Heritage Portale Site, Okuizumo).

In medieval Japan's history, there is one particular event identified as a catalyst for the cementation of sword-making traditions: the Ōnin War (1467-1477), a civil war that was a precursor to the so-called Age of Warring States, the Sengoku era. This conflict, as we saw in Sakai's case, spurred the demand for mass-produced swords, affordable but practical, as war was had now shifted from combat on horse to combat on foot and warlords needed to arm more footmen. Smiths adapted to this new demand, and gained popularity for uchi-gatana (打

⁶⁴ Seki City (関市) (2013). *Kakushichōson no meishō yurai: Seki-shi* (各市町村の名称由来・関市). <https://www.city.seki.lg.jp/0000001408.html> 13-01-2025

刀) - shorter and lighter blades - that cut well, did not bend nor break. Further more, the region introduced a division of labor system and standardized forging techniques for the coming centuries. As Morioka observes, “*Seki’s smiths prioritized quantity without sacrificing durability, a compromise that secured their dominance*”.⁶⁵ This wartime innovation laid the groundwork for Seki’s later adaptability, embedding a culture of pragmatic craftsmanship.

We jump forward to the end of the warring period, to Toyotomi Hideyoshi’s sword hunt order, which foreshadowed the peaceful regime that the country experienced once unified under Tokugawa’s shogunate in the Edo era. Demand for swords abruptly dropped and rendered sword-making an obsolete industry.⁶⁶ By 1720, in the region of Seki, only two of Seki’s 94 smiths specialized in swords; the majority had quickly switched to the manufacture of tools for daily use - razors, scissors, agricultural tools, and eventually cooking knives. It is in this era of stability that we see Seki’s smithing community reorganize into guilds of the craft - 鍛冶仲間 - which operated in a similar fashion to their Sakai’s counterpart. They established standardized steps of manufacturing techniques, notably the laminating of soft and hard steel in cooking and utility knives, and created partnerships with the rising merchants’ guilds - 問屋仲間 - to easily access the flourishing and profitable urban markets. A centralized distribution of these goods was set up through the work of the bussan kaisho (office that oversaw goods flowing in the market, 物産会所), which would keep stock of completed goods and regulate their output to face economic downturns. Although not as high quality as Sakai’s competitors, Seki knives were durable and affordable, and eventually topped the market. By the time swords would be banned from being carried, with the advent of Meiji’s Restoration, through the Haitōrei (廃刀令), enforced 5 years after the Haircut Edict⁶⁷ of 1871 (Danpatsu-rei, 断髮令) - which encouraged samurais to get rid of their typical chonmage topknot, sending the message that the Edo era was effectively over. More European-looking haircuts, called zangiri (散切り), became all the rage and caused demand for razors and barber shears to rise. ⁶⁸

⁶⁵ MORIOKA T. (2016), (n. 62), p. 129 - 30

⁶⁶ MORIOKA T. (2016), 130 - 1

⁶⁷ National Archives of Japan (国立公文書館) (n.d.). *Heakatto no hi* (ヘアカットの日). https://www.archives.go.jp/naj_news/13/anohi.html 13-01-2025

⁶⁸ IDO Seiji (2010). “Tōto” Seki o tazunete (井戸誠嗣) 刀都”関を訪ねて. In 剣道日本編集部 (Kendō Nihon Editorial Department) (Ed.), *Iaidō tora no maki sono san* (居合道虎の巻 其の参) pp. 118–119

A turning point for knife makers in the region is marked by the transition from a fully handmade manufacturing system, to a hybrid system: workshops started integrating factory-like processes to enhance efficiency, crucial to keep up with the increasing demand of daily-use edged tools, while retaining elements of the traditional craft.

A traditional workshop would have a pair of blacksmiths - one wielding the so-called mukōzuchi (向槌), sitting opposite to the one holding the blade still as it was hit - but this method proved quite labor intensive, especially considering the long working hours (an average blacksmith would work 14-16 hours a day). With the introduction of spring hammers (1929) - motor-powered hammers that packed more striking power and speed than even the most skilled blacksmith - the average output of a small workshop would spring from 50 to 70-80 knife blanks per day. In 1935, the more affordable belt hammer followed and was widely adopted by craftsmen not only in Seki but in Sakai and Niigata, the other 2 major smithing centers at the time. What drastically changed with this mechanization of the craft wasn't just raw output numbers, the very nature of the craft would too: a once seated, two-person process evolved into something more factory-like, streamlining operations and improving comfort. Similar improvements are recorded in the grinding and polishing steps as well. Before mechanization, an expert polisher would move up the grit scale of whetstones, from very coarse grinding stones (ara-toishi, 荒砥石) to finer grits, used to refine the edge and bring out the typical shine of a Japanese knife. Motorized rotating grindstones significantly improved the efficiency of these steps, which would usually require dozens of hours.

Combined with the introduction of more advanced buffing techniques, late Taishō and early Shōwa knife-grinding workshops would up tenfold (from 7-8 to 70) the number of knife blanks turned into fully sharpened blades, ready to be sent to a handler for the last assembly step.⁶⁹ Most of the technical groundwork was laid for the scaling up of Seki's cutlery in the post-war period. With Japan's defeat in 1945, and the American Occupation forces banning the production and sales of military blades, those few sword-makers left had no choice but to pivot towards industrial, household, and export-oriented items, ringing thus the curtain down on swordsmithing. In those same years, immediately after we see a new development with the

⁶⁹ ISHIZAKI Toru (石崎徹) (2013), *Nihon no dentō sangyō ni taisuru māketingu apurōchi* (日本の伝統産業に対するマーケティング・アプローチ). A Marketing Approach to Traditional Industries in Japan: A Case Study of Traditional Knife Industry in Seki-City, Gifu-Prefecture. Senshu University; KITADA H. (1996), (n.46)

Korean Conflict (1950 - 1953), which is often associated with the concept of Chōsen-tokuju, or Special Demand from Korea. Supplies of goods and massive investments from the States, put Japan's industries on the spot to become key suppliers for supporting the conflict. This acted as a key stimulus for the revival of the knife industry, which went inevitably dormant during and right after the world conflict. Safety razors and foldable knives became key items of choice for the forces deployed in the Korean peninsula, and even with that war coming to an end, momentum for the industry kept going. Much needed changes in the ways of the industry followed, as the distribution methods had become outdated: traditional wholesaler guilds system, which had up until that point control over getting the products to the market, gave way to more up-with-the-times efficient system. Large manufactures lost the need for an intermediary like the ton'ya (問屋) as their financial assets grew: a third-party that would provide investments for equipment, or keep stock for the maker, were services that the new manufactures had no use for. Domestically they started handling distribution independently, making it more decentralized, and worked with small home-based subcontractors for the final assembling steps of the knives. International markets, which started to play a major role, were accessed through international trading companies. As Seki City's history records note:

"By 1947, the structure of production changed. While manufacturers oversaw sales and final assembly, intermediate processes such as pressing, rough grinding (荒研磨), heat treatment, and finishing were distributed among subcontractors. Home-based workers handled light assembly, allowing for production efficiency with minimal capital investment."

This restructuring benefited makers that aimed to scale up their operations. Seki pioneering this industrialized approach to blade making, and keeping their product lines diversified, are the two characteristics that starkly separate the region from Sakai's approach, where hand-forged blades are still the dominant part of their output. With an eye on the international markets, the following decades would become key to establishing a recognizable Seki blades brand. In the 1970s, not only tech brands like Toshiba, Sony or Panasonic, but Seki cutlery makers like KAI, boomed in the global market, and even managed to compete with established European manufactures such as Germany's Solingen.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ ISHIZAKI T. (2013), *ibid*, p.30-31-32

It was in these years of economic resurgence that the “Seki Cutlery” brand, registered as a regional certification of quality and product origin, was officially introduced.⁷¹ The maneuver strengthened the region’s cutlery position on the market and protect its products against low-cost competitors.

By the end of the century, Seki’s brand was synonymous with high-quality, machine-manufactured and precision-engineered cooking knives, and secured its position as a top knife-making hub of the world, together with the above-mentioned Solingen, and England’s Sheffield. As seen in the previous section on Sakai, Japan’s household blade market is dominated by Seki’s share, with over 50% of the industry’s output (Seki City industrial report, fiscal year 2021).⁷²

Within this section we have seen how Seki’s cutlery industry had its beginnings in a settlement of sword-smiths, which managed to seize the market during tumultuous years of conflict in the Sengoku era; and as demand for swords waned, they managed to quickly shift towards daily use tools in Edo, to ensure the survival of the region. This narration wants to underscore the power of adaptability that lies in Seki’s blacksmithing, which allowed this city to rise to the status of a global knife-making hub.

2.3 Similar Legacies, Diverging Journeys

Before we finally reach our days, let us pause, take a step back, and reflect on the journey we have taken so far - through the formative history of the tool, the feudal origins of Sakai and Seki, two blade-making hubs that have forged today’s cultural and economical landscape of cutlery. Both navigated a tumultuous pre-modern Japan: the supply of weaponry for the warlord’s warfare, the encounter with a foreign craft and its syncretic adaptation (the Portuguese’s firearms and tobacco), and the flourishing of the urban culinary culture of the Edo-era. They both weathered similar pressures - scarcity of resources, shifting demands, and the do-or-die moments in which they had to adapt to new needs of the market - yet emerged from them with different identities. By the modern days, Sakai and Saki had carved starkly

⁷¹ ISHIZAKI T. (2013), *ibid*, p. 32

⁷² Nagoya Customs (名古屋税関) (2022)]. *Hamon shukka jisseki suii* (刃物出荷実績推移), *Nagoya Zeikan Chōsabu Chōsatōkeika* 名古屋税関調査部調査統計課.

different identities. Where Sakai opted on doubling down on their artisanal tradition, be it because of or thanks to the pride that these craftsmen took in their craft; Seki, maybe due to its origins in trade dependency, embraced instead industrial pragmatism. Each region has achieved success, by defining it in its terms. Their stories are stories of resilience and innovation, of adaptability and faith in a millenary craft that stayed unaltered at its core, no matter how strong the historical tides may have pulled in opposing directions. Let us then review one last time, so that we may have these lessons fresh in our minds to guide us in understanding the Japanese knives of today.

The story of Sakai's blacksmithing began with the Kofun-era group of tombs, in Mozu-Furuichi, where early traces of metalwork—simple iron tools and more intricate ceremonial blades—revealed how crafting had its beginning in rituality and agriculture. By the Heian period (794–1185), Buddhist temples acted as catalysts for blacksmithing activities, demanding nails, ritual bells, and other miscellaneous tools that spurred the formation of proto-guild systems. These networks prioritized precision, laying the groundwork for future scaled-up metalworking workshops in the region.

Seki's origins are by contrast rooted in myth and in mobility. The semi-legendary figure of the swordsmith Motoshige, said to have fled Nara's declining workshops, embodies Seki's adaptive spirit. While historians still debate on his historicity, it is his legacy that undoubtedly unified Seki's smithing community, transforming resource scarcity - like reliance on imported iron sand (*satetsu*) and pine-wood charcoal, crucial to quality forging - into an advantage point. Where Sakai manage to thrive on coastal trade, Seki leveraged its role as a checkpoint between inland routes and the sea of Japan, positioning itself as a medieval commercial force.

The Ōnin War (1467–1477) and Sengoku era (1467–1615), with their numerous conflicts, acted as catalysts of evolution and innovation for both regions. Sakai's encounter with Portuguese matchlock firearms in 1543 revolutionized its craft: smiths repurposed barrel-lamination techniques from *tanegashima* guns to the lamination of soft and hard steel seen in kitchen knives and perfected what would become the secular design of the single-edged *kataba* design. This fusion of foreign innovation and local tradition would become vital in the birth of secular designs, prime examples of blades like the *yanagiba* sashimi knife, and the fish-carving *deba* knife.

Seki, meanwhile, became a hub for mass-produced *uchi-gatana* - short, durable, and sharp swords for footmen. The keyword in Seki's approach is pragmatism: standardized forging methods and a more streamlined division of labor allowed the region to meet wartime demand with success, gaining them the praise "*Orezu, magarazu, yoku kireru*" ("They don't bend, they don't break, and they cut well"), an expression that echoes even in today's branding campaigns. While Sakai focused on guarding itself from potential competitors with the 堺極 (Sakai-kiwame) quality stamp, Seki prioritized the scalability of its business model, foreshadowing its industrial future.

A peaceful period under Tokugawa's regime came accompanied by its own unique challenges. Sakai's bet on tobacco knives (*tabako-bōchō*), born from a booming tobacco introduced by the arrival of Portuguese traders, yielded great financial results. These blades, stamped with Sakai's seal, became symbols of precision alongside the *deba* and *yanagiba* - and secured the region a top spot. Guilds of wholesalers (*tonya*) also played a fundamental role in enforcing strict product standards, in order to battle the *nisebōchō*, more affordable knives from the competing regions of Mino Seki, Miki and Sanjō.

Seki, which had relied on its swordmaking until the sword hunt edict and the societal shifts of Edo-era, pivoted towards making razors, shears, and kitchen knives. A pivot which aligned with the coming Meiji-era trends, like the *zangiri* western haircuts, which had pushed the demand for razors, Seki's *kaji nakama* guilds standardized production, prioritizing accessibility over artistry. Where Sakai's identity hinged on exclusivity, Seki's lay in affordability—a dichotomy that will persist to this day..

The period following the Meiji restoration put both regions to the test. The abolition of secular guild systems, and the market flooded with unwieldy western steels, with a Sakai still clinging to tradition had the region's knife industry lag behind in market position: the total output for knives would dwindle to a measly 1.6% of the entire industrial sector. This stubbornness was not all bad, as we'll see the region's craft be awarded with UNESCO recognition. Conversely, Seki embraced the new push for mechanization: by 1929, motorized spring and belt hammers helped boost the productivity of workshops, and the implementation of electric spinning grindstones yielded similar results in the grinding and polishing processes, which were now streamlined and more efficient. Post-war, their paths diverged

irreversibly. Sakai's brand image stayed strong through its highest-quality knives, like the black-forged kuro-uchi blades, which appealed to chefs abroad and domestically, a resilient symbol of "excellence in tradition". Seki stayed in its path of industrialization: the 1950s Korean War (*Chōsen-tokuju*) spurred subcontracting networks and brands like ****KAI****, positioning it as Japan's "cutlery capital" with a 57% market share by 2020.

These journeys reveal two opposites of knife businesses. Sakai's efforts in cultural preservation - its knives are UNESCO-certified artifacts, its values rooted in centuries-old traditional techniques and designs. Seki thrived thanks to its industrial pragmatism, pushing for a brand image that stays up to pace with global competitors.

And yet they both carry their struggles, Sakai struggling to keep the flame of tradition alive as the population shrinks and fewer young people attempt the life of a craftsman, disincentivized from the sacrifices it asks of them. Seki, while successful in terms of market share, is faced with a constant need to innovate and stay competitive within the global market, which is more and more crowded with counterfeits and cheaper competitors. Their stories illuminate critical tensions - tradition vs. industrialization, local identity vs. global reach - that define Japan's knife industry today. As we go back to where this all started, to Tokyo's Kappabashi district in Chapter 3, these themes will represent themselves: in the tourist seeking an original Sakai yanagiba as a cultural totem, in the chef opting for Seki's precision-engineered blades, and the brands trying to find the right balance between heritage and novelty.

We now turn our back to the past and move into the knife industry's current situation - seen through the eyes of the author immersed in a direct work experience as sales staff of a Japanese cutlery, from January until August 2024. We will draw on firsthand observations from Tokyo's Kappabashi district, exploring how these legacies inform branding, the perception of the consumers, and innovative responses to 21st-century challenges.

Chapter 3: Kappabashi



Fig. 28: Kappabashi street, from the exit of Tawaramachi Station. On the top left, the hard to miss Niimi Building huge chef statue

In the following section, I will reflect on my six-month experience as a sales associate at a prominent Japanese cooking knives store, spanning from January 20th, 2024, to my final shift on August 22nd. It is important to clarify that this role was not initially undertaken with formal research objectives in mind; rather, the insights presented here are drawn from retrospectively curated anecdotes and observations deemed most relevant to this study. Given the exploratory nature of this report, all findings derived from this period will be treated as qualitative data, prioritizing depth and experiential nuance over quantitative measurement.

3.1 The Onboarding

Pre-Arrival and Expectations

My first official day as sales staff in Kappabashi was filled with both nervousness and excitement, as every first day on the job tends to be. With it being also my first work experience abroad, the sentiment was further intensified. I had done plenty of “research” on what a part-time job in Tokyo might entail - asking around fellow exchange students who had already been working at convenience stores or language schools - but nothing quite matched the peculiar reality I had gotten myself in. While the interview had given away hints of what

the shop might have been like, I still thought to myself that a traditional Japanese knife store, in old town Asakusa, had to be closer to the image of a structured, distinctly Japanese workplace, with politeness and hierarchies. Those assumptions would soon be flipped on their heads.

Hoping to make a good first impression on Zack - the store manager who had interviewed me back in January - I crammed a quick “knife-shapes 101” review session, using the materials on the company’s website, to make use of the long hour and a half of commuting from Kichijōji, Inokashira Park station, to Tawaramachi Station, on the complete opposite side of Tokyo. By 9 a.m. I had already boarded the train, Keio Line, and had a fairly quiet first half of commuting, as the odd time allowed me to avoid the infamous crowds of rush hour.

Stepping Into the Store

The shop’s atmosphere was, to put it plainly, so very “Japanese” - and by that I am referring to the kind of Japanese that a foreign enthusiast of the culture might have envisioned. A heavy scent of incense, the kind you would find in Buddhist temples, and shamisen and koto acoustic kinds of music filled the shop’s ambiance. The design of the store - minimalistic glass displays and black shelves, white walls decorated with patterned kimono fabrics, and prints of kappas and samurai in the Floating World style - could only be described as that one tech store famous for its apple logo, with knives instead of smartphones in the display glasses and magnetic shelves. My nervousness vanished as soon as Zack, the store manager, greeted me in a very casual manner, the way you’d expect an old friend to do. And in similar fashion the other staff - a Filipino boy, a half-Japanese girl manager of the sake floor, and another Italian part-timer - at the shop showed me playful and banter-like greetings. The easy banter and camaraderie so typical of foreigners that meet abroad, so akin to the international exchange event that you might find in universities like mine, was a far cry from the “traditional Japanese crafts” boutique that lined up in the street of Kappabashi. That sense of foreignness that came from the English chatter of the staff, and the sleek modernity of the interiors, was in stark contrast with the real protagonist of the store, the knives. Carefully organized by shape and size, on the magnetic racks on the walls, and in the glass displays in the middle of the room. An interplay of foreign and local, modern and centuries-old references.

The Official Orientation

Once the introductions were out of the way, Zack led me to the compact inventory room, which acted as the staff lounge as well, behind the counter at the end of the first floor. I got changed into the shop's uniform, a modern revisitation of a hakama - a traditional type of clothing - and quickly went over the contract's details, and the shop's promotion system: the more industry-specific knowledge you acquire, about steels, knife makers, forging methods and knife hubs of Japan, the higher your hourly wage becomes. At the end of each month, or whenever the store manager deems you ready enough, a written and oral test would determine whether you had gathered enough knowledge to level up. To prepare for my first test in February, I was given a digital copy of the training manual, both in Japanese and English, which covers everything from basic knife shapes, the most popular Japanese steels and their compositions, and an introduction to forging hubs and finishes. The guidebook's contents and Zack's explanation of the brand emphasized how the core mission of the store was to, through expertly trained staff on the technicalities of the product, and the multitude of languages available, tourists could be eased into the world of Japanese crafts - knives, sakes and eventually even bonsai and other traditional areas. While much less formal than the neighboring knife stores, the brand's pitch heavily hinged on the allure of "traditional Japanese crafts". For the meantime, my role boiled down to greeting customers, answer basic questions about our lineup of products, and pass them along to a senior staff member if unsure of the answer. We were encouraged to greet with a warm "Konnichiwa!", and break the ice through small talk on what had brought them to Tokyo, Kappabashi.

First Hours on the Job

With orientation done, my first real shift had begun. For much of the morning, my main tasks were cleaning shelves, taking dust off of knives, and applying a rust prevention oil, camellia oil, on the more rust-prone blades - the high-carbon steel knives, simply referred to as carbon blades. As I pulled off of the magnetic wall the first knife, I quickly realized how easy it was for anyone to reach for one of the hundreds of extremely sharp knives. Zack had probably taken notice of this flicker of anxiety, and quickly demonstrated "proper knife-handling etiquette" - always mindful of the magnet's pull (strong enough to hold the blade in place), tip angled towards the ceiling, lift gently from the handle, he instructed. As I started to greet my



Fig. 30: an open display shelf, with a magnet strip attached to its back, holding the knives in place

first customers and guide them through the various sections on the two display walls of the store, I became increasingly familiar with which knife shape was in what wall and row. At the end of the store, there was a wall with knife shapes more rooted in Japanese history. At the very bottom row, there was the fish-carving Deba knife, with its thick spine and short blade, and right above it the Yanagiba knife, a long and slender sword-shaped knife specialized in presentation cuts of sashimi. Both blades were born from the minds of the craftsman in Edo-era Sakai, both one-beveled (with just one edge sharpened) blades. The wall was completed by Kiritsuke and Bunka knives, shapes that were born out of a renewed interest in meat-

based meals under the influences of Europe, during the Meiji era: with their pronounced K-shaped tips, they excelled at cutting off fat and meat from the bones. The theme shifted with the second wall, on the right side of the store from the entrance to more “Westernized” knife shapes - the Gyuto, Santoku, and Petty knives - which were born respectively from a Japanese reinterpretation of the French chef knife (Gyuto), a need for an all-purpose versatile home-cook blade (santoku knife) in the 60s, and a precision blade for quick work off the cutting board (petty knife).

In the afternoon, after observing senior staff serving customers, and demonstrating cutting techniques with the store’s daikon, it came to my turn to showcase to a group of college students the famed sharpness of a Japanese knife. As I sliced through the dense white radish, which is as thick as a potato for comparison, the blade met little to no resistance. The customers’ eyes lit up in excitement, and so did mine. The act of slicing had condensed in it the skill developed over centuries - forging, grinding and sharpening, handle-making.

Day's End Reflection

At 6 p.m., I clocked out, recording my first shift on the store's iPad, waved goodbye to Zack and the others, and headed towards the closest station of Tawaramachi. I hopped on the train headed for Shibuya, crowded with salarymen heading back home from their offices; while squeezed by the crowd I was focused on replaying in my mind the day's many discoveries: the unexpectedly friendly foreign staff, the casual attitude encouraged by the store manager, the store's intriguing modern-meets-tradition aesthetic, Zack's introduction to the blades, and the training guide's contents that promised there was a whole world of knowledge to be uncovered. Though I'd forgotten most terms from the day's crash course in knife-smithing and Japanese knives, it was not frustration nor discouragement - instead, curiosity and excitement settled in me as I poured over the PDF manual and my scribbled notes: *bevels*, *ferrites*, *ferrules*, *tangs*, *rivets*, *differential hardening*, "*honyaki*," "*kasumi*." Each term was demanding to be labeled, sorted, and connected to each other, in order to see through the puzzling technical jargon, that there lay an interconnected network of know-how, accumulated knowledge across many crafts - forging, grinding and sharpening. My shift had ended, but as days passed and my hours in the store accumulated, the hunch that this experience had in store for me more than a well-paid salary gradually became a certainty.

3.2 The Budding Researcher (March–April)

Shifting Responsibilities and the Promotion

It had been roughly a month since I started my part-time at Kappabashi when my role started to gradually transform. On top of the basic routine - greeting customers, handling simple sales, rearranging knives, and restocking the display shelves - I was assigned new tasks that indicated a growing trust in my capabilities. By the end of March, I was taking full charge of sales, handling all the register operations (shipping, client account registration) and tax-refund (which amounted to a 10% of the tag price on all products) paperwork for eligible visitors. I was by now able to tell most of the popular items' positions without having to check on the price tag, which hung on all knives' handles. My brain was starting to map the store's layout - all thanks to the daily routine of rearranging and cleaning.

With the knowledge and experience accumulated, confidence in acing the promotion test settled in, and Zack must have believed the same, since he asked me directly when would I

take my shot at it. The test consisted of a structured evaluation of the level of understanding of the manuals' contents, covering everything from major Japanese steel types, knife shapes and their detailed use cases, Japanese and English names for blade polishes and finishes, major knife-making regions.

The test itself was a blend of written short-answer questions—designed to simulate the kind of bite-sized explanations we'd give customers—and role play of sort, where Zack and the assistant manager, Tanaka, pretended to be a pair of particularly demanding knife enthusiasts. I found myself detailing the key differences between all the Japanese steels, like how VG10 Stainless steel - developed in Fukui Prefecture from the Takefu Special Steel Company - is a strong recommend for home cooks: due to its higher chromium and molybdenum contents (respectively 15% and 1%), it stands well the “abuse” that is likely to receive in the hands of an inexperienced cook. A much harder Aogami Super high-carbon alloy will be instead prone to chipping, unless handled by a professionally trained cook. The test had been tweaked a bit to test my Japanese too: Tanaka questioned me about forging techniques, which I had been introduced to only in English to that point. I did stumble in a couple passages, but managed to display a level of competence that ensured i would pass the Japanese section as well.

With the promotion to advanced part-timer, my duties increased. For instance, I was now to handle by myself the occasional Japanese onlooker who ventured in the store, given that most of my other coworkers (exception made for Tanaka), did not speak nearly enough Japanese to appropriately serve a local customer. Under Zack's tutelage, I'd spend downtime in the demonstration corner of the store, practicing the basics of sharpening on a Japanese whetstone. Although it would take weeks to reach an acceptable level, worthy of the shop's sharpening demonstration, feeling the steel grind under my thumbs as i repeated the motion of stroking the blade's edge up and down the stone, it had an almost ritual and meditative nature - a hint perhaps of a sense craftsmanship entering my day-to-day retail world.

Diving Deeper into Knife Research

It was around the same time that a weekend day trip to Shimokitazawa's Tsutaya - a popular bookstore chain - led me to the discovery of a volume that would stimulate a shift in me. The

book titled “砥石と包丁の選び方・使い方・育て方”⁷³ (How to choose, use and nurture your coking knife and whetstone) by author Fujiwara Masashi (藤原将志). Fujiwara-san was nothing short of a celebrity in the world of Japanese knives, i learned with a quick Google search: director of the Japan Hōchō Togi Association (日本包丁研ぎ協会), had conducted research on how an knife-edge created with a natural whetstone leads to measurable changes in the quality of foodstuff⁷⁴, and appeared on national television and magazines on multiple occasions teaching how a knife’s quality impacted cooking as much as the quality of the ingredients. The contents of the book had reflected the expertise of Fujiwara-san: a treasure trove of Japanese knives lore, rich in cultural context, which ranged from specific nuances on region-specific forging methods (how Sakai’s craft had a division-of-labor system, while Seki had a factory driven approach that began in the early Taishō era), to more practical advices (whetstone maintenance, knife techniques, etc.) It was everything the company’s training manual should have been, and much more: the book’s contents had been clearly written with intent and passion towards the craft and cooking techniques that surround Japanese knives - and was not afraid of delving in the social and historical complexities of the industry, aspects the manual only glossed over.

I devoured the book during my long train commutes, and many were the revelations it led me to. Of particular relevance was the segment on the differences between mass-produced, semi-handmade and truly hand-forged knives: a nuanced line that Kappabashi stores, in their marketing materials threaded with what seemed like ill-intent, and led me to become more skeptic of the street’s products. The common narrative was that “handmade” knives imply that they are “hand-forged”, or, in other words have been hammered into the shape of the desired blade from the raw billet of steel, an imagery evocative of traditional Japanese smithing. Fujiwara-san’s book was instead very clear on the different use of the words: a “handmade” knife heavily involves the use of modern machinery, like press-rolls to make laminates out of the forged billets of steel, and die cutting presses to stamp out knife blanks. These blanks would then be grinded, sharpened, and assembled to a wooden handle by a craftsman, hence the “handmade” label. This discovery had me question the actual manufacturing process

⁷³ FUJIWARA Masashi (2023). Toishi to hōchō no erabikata, tsukaikata, sodatekata (砥石と包丁の選び方・使い方・育て方), 柴田書店.

⁷⁴ Togi Japan. Hōchō no kireaji no kenkyū (包丁の切れ味の研究). <https://togi-japan.com/about/>

behind every knife i had sold, exactly thank to that label that implied secular tradition and quality. Discussions with Zack did reveal that, with the booming demand of knives from abroad that flooded Kappabashi, as well as other shopping centers, the so-called “katanuki-bōchō” (stamp-cut knives, 型抜き包丁) had become a necessity to keep up with the trend. It did not help that wholesalers tended to be quite secretive about the actual names of workshops from which the supply of knives came from, providing only a generic “region of origin”.

Customer Interactions and Field Observations

My reading progressed, and I found myself trying to weave into my talks with customers the newfound information, although with utmost care. The shop’s branding relied on the ambiguity of these nuanced definitions - handmade, hand-forged - and it became a territory that I had to thread carefully, with customers that clearly wanted concise pitches, the likes of “high carbon equals sharper and long-lasting edge, stainless means less rust”. Only the occasional hardcore enthusiast with genuine curiosity on the hows behind a Japanese knife would let me delve into deeper exchanges. Explaining for example, that a “Damascus knife” had no real mechanical advantage over any other 3-layered knife and was but the result of a design choice, would only dampen the excitement of a causal customer, and intrigue the hobbyists.

It was around mid-March that an interaction with a visitor particularly stuck to memory: Jordan was the name, and we spent what felt like the whole afternoon discussing ideal edge geometries for this or that task, trends in the global market, and spaced to more causal topics, like eateries the staff would visit most nearby. He was overwhelmingly knowledgeable, and suspicion grew in me that he could not be just any regular enthusiast. It would turn out he was working as sharpener and salesman at a major knife shop retailer back in Canada and was in town to visit some of the craftsman his company had in their roster, do some shootings and interviews for a documentary project on Japan’s legendary knife-smiths. When a month prior to this encounter, I’d have drowned in the conversation, being able to keep up filled me with determination to dig deeper down the rabbit hole. When I questioned him about the sudden boom in popularity of Japanese made blades especially among north-americans and canadians, Jordan would bring up as a catalyst a particularly popular late-night TV show - “Forged in fire” - that started airing in 2015: here several episodes had showcased the artistry

and mastery involved in Japanese sword-making and knife-making, cementing in the minds of consumers the association “Japanese-manufacture=sharp-and-durable”, that media like “The Last Samurai” and “Samurai Jack” had introduced in the early 2000s. Right before leaving, we would exchange business cards and SNS contacts, and still to this day we regularly exchange opinions on this new knife release or that one event.



Fig. 29: a santoku knife, decorated with laser-engraved Sakura petals

This chat had probably been the last piece of the puzzle, that settled in mind and gave me a new understanding of my role at the knife company - I was not just any part-timer scrambling for extra pennies. I had started becoming part of a wider community, of knife enthusiasts and professionals. And maybe that newly acquired perception gave me the tools to start looking at things differently.

I started paying closer attention to sales data, partially to track my own sales performance - i was finally able to compete for an end-of-month bonus - but also out of genuine curiosity about market trends. For example, April and May sales exhibited quite a distinct shift. Cherry blossoms were in full bloom, and attracted a surge of German and French tourists, alongside the steady influx of Chinese, American and Canadians, the backbone of our profits. New “sakura-themed” product lines emerged in Kappabashi knife shops, and ours was no exception: hand and laser-engraved-petals adorned the flats of otherwise entry-level, affordable Gyuto and Santoku knives - casual visitors loved them. The added visuals boosted these product lines to the top of the popularity rankings, so much so that supply could not keep up with demand. Many customers would leave empty-handed due to our depleted stocks.

Personal Growth and Evolving Perspective

As April's cherry trees reached their peak, I felt my status in the store undergoing a transformation, from just an "extra set of hands" to a staffer whose opinion mattered. Sales performance had significantly increased over the last 2 months, as did my knowledge, and coworkers took notice of that: they began asking my aid on advanced questions on steel compositions and other technical matters that the manual did not cover. Particularly if the answer to their doubts was locked behind a Japanese-written blog or pamphlet. With my university classes being mostly concentrated on the weekdays, and shifts in the weekends, I had achieved a perfect balance between work and study. It especially gratified me to know that the two were somehow interconnected, as my Japanese studies' progress was reflected in the comfort with which I could go through the more intricate materials on knives. Something that always bugged me about language study was the lack of a "direction" - which I realized I had at last found in the most unexpected of locations, Asakusa, Kappabashi. A sense that I could assist in educating the public I came in contact with, through the knowledge acquired on my Japanese readings.

Simultaneously, I developed an ethical awareness about marketing certain knives as purely "hand-forged" when, in fact, many were partially or even mostly machine-pressed. No one in the store was willfully dishonest; it was simply the accepted standard in Kappabashi to market these lines under a broad "handmade" umbrella. Forging alone does not make a good knife, as successive steps are of equal importance - heat treatment, grinding, finishing and sharpening counted a lot. Still, the clash between my role as a salesman, to push a commercial narrative in the store's interests, and the more complex realities behind most product lines.

Interactions with Neighboring Shops and Craftsmen

Zack and Tanaka had been respectively managers and assistant-to-manager of the store since its fairly recent opening in March 2022, so they had time to build connections with the staff of neighboring, older Kappabashi cutleries. At times when customer flow would slow down, we would sit at the edge of the roadway and enjoy a cigarette and chat about how business was going. A longtime store manager of a decade-running cutlery right next to ours would inform me how the area had always been a favorite of the Tokyoites for shopping cooking utensils of

all kinds, and only with the boom of tourism post-2010 cutleries flooded the area.

Concurrently in those same years, works to relocate Japan's biggest fish market, the Tsukiji, were approaching their completion (the relocation in Toyosu would be finalized in October 2018) - this might have brought many cutleries which operated in the market's area open to visitors, to find an alternative profitable location. Asakusa's *shitamachi* Edo-era sceneries fulfilled foreign visitors' expectations of an imagined Japan - and therefore a lot of that tourist influx was funneled in its streets: a fact that did not escape the clever minds of knife retail shops.

At times our shop's craftsman would visit the store, less to talk business and more out of curiosity of seeing their creations displayed in such an elegant and modern context - in stark contrast to the workshop in which they were forged. Overhearing their conversations with company representatives, about how gratifying it was to have excited customers from all over the world leave the store with their knives, forged in the ways their fathers had taught them, made the lore I had read on Fujiwara's book come to life.

The High-End Italian Embassy Sale

A particularly outstanding client had visited the shop amid April's chaotic rush to the Sakuras: a fellow Italian, first chef to Tokyo's Italian Embassy, he had stepped into the store attracted by positive reviews on our customer service - which advertised we had Italian speaking staff, among many others. In contrast to the casual knife enjoyer, he needed a full set that could serve him well in his new position. A hand-forged Sakai Deba knife crafted in Blue # 2 carbon steel - for its edge retention and ease of sharpening, as it is a knife that works mostly around bones. Its more elegant counterpart, a White # 1 Yanagiba - an alloy extremely pure in composition (Iron and Carbon at around 1.1%), which allows to easily shape the edge without compromising on hardness. An all-rounder 21cm Gyuto knife, in Silver 3 stainless steel - with a higher carbon content than the average stainless alloy, prized for its edge retention and resistance to corrosion - and a short 12cm Petty knife in Damascus fashion, as a showpiece for his clients to enjoy. The sale talk went on for one hour or so, as we discussed his needs and preferences, and it ended up being my biggest sale yet, nearing the 200,000 yen mark. I recall it as a personal milestone of growth, proof that i could truly aid a professional

Summarizing This Phase

March and April had been, to summarize, months crucial to the evolution of my role in the store, as I was not bound anymore to the early routines, and I had managed to create my own niche. I had outgrown the rookie label, been promoted to advanced part-timer and developed an understanding of the product and its behind-the-scenes that allowed me to navigate advanced with ease through the busy season of cherry blossoms. A newfound confidence in my sales abilities and knife knowledge, acquired through countless readings and digging, planted in me a seed that soon had sprouted into determination to challenge myself and the notions taught by the shop's training manual. Perhaps i could take all this - the everyday learning, the chats, the readings, and sales - to a further level and transform it into real academic research.

3.3 Taking the Lead (May–June) - Advanced Responsibilities and Peak Sales

A New Title, New Responsibilities

Early May meant that the time for my last promotion test was approaching, and I felt as ready as I could ever be. I had by then clocked in around three months' worth of shifts and spent almost as much time delving into the lore, history, and technicalities of Japanese knives. Looking back to where I had started this journey from - an exchange student in search of a good paying hustle, with barely any notion of Japanese knives - I began seeing the ripples that this experience might have on my career moving out of academia. This time, the test would cover mostly the hows of a store manager's tasks - writing reports on inventory, identifying what products to restock, handling transfers of inventory with other store's managers and the office staff, and the such - as once promoted a Senior part-timer was expected to be able to cover for and assist the store's manager in their every tasks. I would be offered to take this final test around the first week of June, and expectations were I would ace this one too - and so I did. I had now stepped into a light managerial role, acting as a sort of bridge between regular part-timers and top management: I would assist in choosing new product entries, reviewing materials for training, coming up with ideas for the store's arrangement of knives - like "Staff recommends!" Knife sets.

Stepping Up as a Mentor

Being a “senior” meant I had the manager’s trust in training newcomers, who would regularly pass through the main store to receive Zack’s information dump on knives and company policies, to be then sent in one of the other two stores in Asakusa. Since he had been busy with parallel developments of the company - which aimed to expand outside of Kanto at the time - my promotion to Senior was conveniently timed, I felt. At first, eager to have the newcomers onboard, I over-explained technical aspects that had flown over my head when I was in their same position - steel matrixes, concave edge geometries, and the whats and whys of carbon oxidization in carbon steel knives. I soon realized that approach might have been overwhelming - recalling my own frustrations from February in memorizing the avalanche of industry-specific terminology - and started refining my teachings, coming up with layers of complexity that I would gradually introduce. A rookie was no different than a casual customer, wandering in the store not knowing exactly what to expect from it. They mostly were foreign students - from universities and language schools - with minimal previous experience, just like me. Every teaching moment felt rewarding, as I managed to take their confusion and turn it into curiosity. “The moment you first pick up a Japanese knife, cooking stops being a chore”, I would often say, as their surprise to the light feel of a wooden Oak wa-handle settled in. The secret behind a wa-bōchō’s lightness - I would then explain - lies in its handle, which is often made of Japanese 朴の木 (hōnoki, Japanese Oak wood), chestnut, magnolia or - in the case of more premium options - ebony wood, topped with a Water buffalo horn to secure the blade and prevent water infiltration. The tang of the blade - a thin strip of steel that tails the knife - is first heated with a stove’s fire, slotted in a cavity preemptively opened, and depending on the maker, fixed in place with beeswax or other composites. In stark contrast with the heavy build of a German knife, with its full-body steel rivets that bolt the knife in place.



Fig. 30: the author, as he illustrates the basics of sharpening to a newcomer

Confidence in the Sales Floor

June was also a month of revelations, as I noticed my sales talk evolving into a more efficient run-through of the fundamentals - stainless vs carbon steel, wa-bōchō vs yō-bōchō (Japanese vs Western), single bevel vs double bevel - and I became able to gauge with a glance if there was genuine interest from customers, or if they had just wandered in for a quick look. The occasional demanding customer would let me delve in longer, more disconnected talks on forging processes, regional differences in manufacturing style between Takefu's innovative stainless and powder steels, and the more traditional approach of Sakai's 打刃物鍛冶屋 -uchi-hamono-kajiya.

The shop had a strong presence online - the company's origin was in e-commerce after all - and prided hundreds of positive reviews referencing how unique of a service it was being served in a multitude of languages, from knowledgeable and friendly foreign staff - likely implying that the many other cutleries in the street were not as approachable. The language barrier posed a big obstacle for the operations of long-running cutleries - staffed mostly with locals - and our company, together with a couple other more modern stores, like Seisuke Hamono and Kama Asa, took advantage of exactly that. Having a multitude of languages at disposal allowed for the company to trump the competition and push for prices higher than what the market would normally allow: a mark-up of around 20/30% was a fair price to pay for the tailored customer experience offered.

It was around that same time that cherry blossoms started falling off Sakura trees, traffic of visitors came to a halt, and so did the shop's sales that had been peaking until then. Contrary to that trend, I saw an uptick in higher-value sales, likely because we had more time to invest on individual customers, the chaotic rushes of groups of the prior months settled down. A stand out sale of those 2 months, a middle-aged Japanese couple that came in the shop attracted by our advertising of a particular craftsman's knife - Fukushima City's Yaginuma Nobuhisa⁷⁵, head of a research center on steels and knife making (道正古屋古代製鉄研究所), famed for his honyaki pieces. The customers had experienced one of the center's "make your own knife" activities, and fell in love with Yaginuma-san's craft, so much so that they

⁷⁵ Doushougoya Steel Laboratories, (n.d.). *About Doushougoya Steel Laboratories*. <https://doushougoyasteel.com/organization/> 15-01-2025

wanted to get one of his signature chef's knife. But what had been so special about the honyaki? Allow me to explain in more technical details:

Honyaki knives are regarded as the peak of modern knife-making. Most modern knives have a layered san-mai (三枚^{さんばい}) structure, made of a softer steel cladding on the outer layers, and sandwiched in between is the much harder core, the sole reason behind the famed sharpness and edge retention of Japanese knives. It is a balanced approach that provides softness where needed (at the spine and outer layers) to absorb shocks and hardness where the blade comes into contact with food (the cutting edge). This manufacturing method is known as “forge welding”. There is a compromise, tho: during tempering of the steel, the carbon particles of the harder core are dispersed in the soft cladding, and this migration of carbon leads to degraded sharpness and rust resistance. With honyaki, a lower temperature forging allows the formation of a much more stable “matrix” (the internal micro-structures of iron and carbons). But the world of steels is a world of compromises: this stable, monolithic construction renders a steel that much more fragile to sudden changes in temperature, like the ones that occur during quenching, and therefore to cracking. Craftsmen have ideated a countermeasure - tsuchi-oki (土置き) or “application of clay” - to this one weakness. By applying a thick layer of clay on the spine and flats of the blade, they create a heat-resistant barrier on the part of the blade that needs to be softer to absorb shocks, and instead let the intense heat harden the edge and the areas to its proximity. This technique - known as “differential heat treating” - was adapted to knife-making from Medieval sword-making. Another common link between the 本焼き - term that originates from the words *honmono* (本物, the real thing) and *yakiire* 焼き入れ (tempering) - and the medieval katana is the one-of-a-kind wave pattern - the hamon (刃紋) - that emerges right along where the clay had been placed. Each hamon is unique to the style-preference of craftsman, as there are two options on how to quench a knife after tempering - with water water-quenching, or “mizu-yaki” 水焼き^{みずやき}), heat is sucked out of the steel almost immediately resulting in much higher hardness; with oil (oil quenching, or abura-yaki, 油焼き^{あぶらやき}) the temperature drop is not as dramatic (resulting in a more stable and controlled result), produces more crisp 刃文 than water quenching, but at the cost of final hardness.⁷⁶ Only a handful of craftsman in all Japan know how to properly craft a honyaki

⁷⁶ JIKKO Hamono (n.d.). *Honyaki hōchō to wa?* (本焼き包丁とは) <https://www.jikko.jp/c/knowledge/detail/kouzou/honyaki-knife> 15-01-2025

blade - as the recipe of the clay employed in tsuchi-oki, its thickness and the appropriate tempering temperatures are kept secrets - and even among these elite, it is not uncommon to produce cracked or warped knives (it is said 1 every 10).

In fashion similar to the above explanation, I had guided the couple through what made Yagiuma-san's creation so special, and they paid with no hesitation the prohibitive 189,000 yen price tag of the master's Gyūtō knife. I came to appreciate how gratifying it was to score a big sale for the store, born from a genuine interest for the intricate craft and stories hidden behind each blade.

Growing Technical Expertise and Realism

On the more practical side, I started taking my sharpening practice sessions to another level, with Zack having me attempt single-bevel knife-edge maintenance on a few Deba knives of the store. It would happen more often than one would think, that products delivered in the store would be “unfinished”, in other words without the main edge properly finished - this last step, called 本刃付け (honba-zuke) was crucial to the blade's performance. I learned to understand the peculiar construction of a single-bevel knife through these sharpening sessions: 片刃 (Kataba) knives, referred to as かすみ (for the foggy finish that signifies where the steels are weld forged), are typical of wabōchō. A softer steel (called nantetsu, 軟鉄; Carbon content of 0,25%≤) functions as the flexible spine for the harder steel (kōtetsu, 鋼鉄) found at the edge. The latter, which many assume is a completely flat surface, has instead two distinct areas: the urasuki 裏すき (concave section that allows for an air-pocket to create between steel and food, allowing for its famed food release) and the uraoshi 裏押し (a thin flat area that runs all along the edge and spine). The main bevel tapers down towards the edge and meets the flat uraoshi into an extremely thin edge, angled at 13/15 degrees - here lied the secret to a sashimi knife's unrivaled sharpness. “When sharpening these knives”, explained Zack, “you need only to follow the blade's original shape by pushing flat the bevel on the stone and grind away steel until you recreate that same acute angle. Then, you flip the knife, have the uraoshi flat on the stone, and restore it to around a width of 2mm”. It was easier said than done, but it indeed was a step down in difficulty compared to sharpening its double-beveled counterpart. This “get-your-hands-dirty” sharpening experiences helped me connect

with the craft, which at times may have a bit disconnected from the manuals and articles I was reading on a daily basis.

As I got done reading Fujiwara-san's *knife-bible*, a new source started taking over my lunch-break studies. Video content from Japan-based cook-turned-YouTuber "Oiri_kitchen"⁷⁷ informed me of the gaps between the retail-level knowledge I had acquired so far and the genuine expertise that lies in the decades of experience of professional smiths, sharpeners, and knife-factory supervisors. Oiri's passion for Japanese knives and washoku was as clear and deep as the understanding and connections he had: in his series of videos called "潜入おいり!" - Oiri Infiltrates! - he would get to visit famous craftsman laboratories in Sakai, factory complexes in Seki, or exclusive knife-retail stores, and interview the hands and minds behind the industry's success. The insights I gained from his content were invaluable, as it provided a peek at places and people normally inaccessible to regular folks like myself, and knowledge that could be found nowhere if not in the veterans he connected with. Stand out videos of his are the almost 2-hour long interview to Shotaro Nomura⁷⁸, a Sakai-based sharpener with 64 years of experience, and the infiltration of Fukuda Knives' factory⁷⁹ in Seki, in which it was shown the high-tech approach - so characteristic of Seki's manufacturing - involved in the makings of their "KISEKI" award-winning all-purpose knife.

In parallel to devouring Oiri's eye-opening content, I found myself personally clashing with the narrative-driven marketing approach of my company, which, in contrast to Oiri's work, hid behind illusions of artisanal legacies. My role as a part-timer at the knife shop had started turning into a completely different beast - a passion, perhaps a possible career path - and therefore, I found it disheartening how the company's goals of expansion and non-transparent sale tactics did not align with my personal wants of correctly educating the public.

I found myself having to deal with this slight discomfort. My recent promotion to senior allowed me to get a closer look to the behind-the-scene workings of a big cutlery retailer. The crown-jewels of the store - our affiliated craftsman knives, like the Yagiuma-san's honyaki

⁷⁷ Oiri Kitchen (2019). *Oiri Kitchen [YouTube channel]*. https://www.youtube.com/@oiri_kitchen

⁷⁸ Oiri Kitchen (2022). *Hōchō no migaki kata to togikata [How to polish and sharpen a knife]* [YouTube video]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SvVtScbj2aY> 16-01-2025

⁷⁹ Oiri Kitchen (2023). *Shinken ni naru! Saikō no hōchō test [Getting serious! The ultimate knife test]* [YouTube video]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ulOYU-A5xsg> 16-01-2025

previously mentioned - could be easily linked to locations of workshops, names of craftsman and all related information. On the other hand, most of the other products were practically untraceable: AUS-10, VG1, and VG10 stainless steel knives, of which we knew very little if not for a generic “made in Kochi”, or “made in Niigata”, tag on its handles. The Damascus patterns or hammered finish could not distract me anymore from the elephant in the room, and therefore, I confronted the top management about the issue. The matter would never be dealt with, as the only answer I could get was that “the wholesalers themselves will not disclose on origin of product”. While the issue never escalated to an open conflict - as I was aware of my role and duties towards the company as salesman - I started sensing the first cracks develop in the relationship with the overly-romantic fantasies tailored for the foreign customers, at the very core of knife retailing. I had hoped for better educational or labeling efforts, as the industry had some outstanding examples of doing just that. The above-mentioned Fukuda Knives with their KISEKI line, or the neighboring TOJIRO Knives, were not afraid and on the contrary of the association with industrialized knives, and displayed as a medal of pride how their technological advancements could rival the quality of hand-forged traditions.

Balancing Passion and Reality

June was also the time for me to reflect on the future. Each “aha!” moment from watching Oiri’s videos came accompanied by the thought of continuing to do this after graduating. I had grown fond of Kappabashi, its cutlery stores and community, of course, but also the delicious bentō from the bentō-ya right around the corner, the coffee-blends of the Earth’s Coffee, a favorite cafe of the staff right across the street, the view of the Sky Tree accompanying every moment of commuting to and away from the store. All these elements blended into the mix that made up my Kappabashi street experience. I would at times, together with the staff that I got close to the most, toyed with the silly idea of forging a unique niche in the streets’ retailing stage, by opening a store that would embrace the original fire that gave birth to the knife-making tradition, be educational and transparent.

The reality of the end-of-term presentations at Seikei University, with finals approaching, brought me back to Earth and to plan my next steps: if I was to make a research project out of this, the time was right. I started by transcribing the whole Fujiwara book, this team with a

structured approach in mind; I would add comments on terminology that expanded on the definitions, and make a functional glossary out of it, create nested pages in the transcription's file that redirected to workshops' profile pages and related contents from Oiri's channel and blogs. A great deal of the bibliography that has now been implemented in this work was found thanks to those months of reviewing and cross-referencing the blog contents, Oiri's videos, and Fujiwara's book: this last one was especially crucial in helping me structure the historical section of this work, as it led me to identify a timeline of knives in Japanese history.

By the end of June, I had found a sharpened sense of direction - both academically and personally - and was dead set on making the most out of my time left in Kappabashi.

3.4 Final Weeks and Farewell

My final months in Kappabashi were painted in an odd sense of comfort blended with urgency. I would carry my last shifts the same as usual, cleaning knives, correcting rookies on the differences between this or that steel, enjoying the usual cigarette and can of beer in front of the close-by convenience store, with the usual suspects from the neighboring cutlery stores. The traffic of inbound customers had slowed down to a more comfortable pace as the intense end-of-summer heat of Tokyo dampened foot traffic. Long gone were the days of customers rushing in the store to get a hold of the latest Sakura knife. Business for the store stayed on a positive note, as with any retail store that positions in the high-end/luxury goods, pushing out good numbers with scarcity of visitors becomes a game generating profit from up-selling and cross-selling to the available customers. We had more time to invest in sales leads that belonged to the more affluent end of the customers' spectrum. The countless hours invested in researching the product came once again to aid in this last period and allowed me to push out good numbers. In regards to research, as I felt the clock ticking, I spent my last weekends strolling the neighborhood's stores with the intention of capturing end-of-summer trends or evolutions in the street. I observed an increase in English-speaking staff of foreign nationality, likely hired during the less busy season in order to prepare for Autumn's expected peaks of visitors. It was as evident as ever how much the street's life depended on the global fascination that had caught the wider public.

My last shift ended on August 22. The day was spent no differently than the rest of summer's days. After closing, I headed off for one more convenience-store beer with my closest coworkers, some of whom I'd grown surprisingly attached to. They wished me luck, and a handful admitted they still hoped I'd find a last-minute way to stay on. I felt a pang knowing how much I'd come to love Kappabashi and the half a year spent between the fervent summer's heat and the flurry of customers of spring.

My next goal was now clear: taking all I'd personally experienced on the field, and confirm, through a more rigorous and structured research, if the micro-trends I had witnessed in Kappabashi were reflected in the modern broader knife market. How retailing companies and makers navigated mass tourism, relied on the imagery of "centuries-old forging mysticism", or integrated OEM networks in their manufacturing with a certain discretion, tiptoeing around the elephant in the room that is the "handmade" label.

With the next and final chapter, we will shift the focus from the microcosm of Kappabashi to a macro-level perspective. Building on top of the insights from my time on the ground, I plan to present through the figures made available from national agencies and each region's industrial federation, a "snapshot" of Japan's knife market in recent years: how did makers and retailers in Seki and Sakai adapt their branding strategies to the new boom for Japanese handmade knives - if they have at all - and to what results it may have led? To bring into a sharper view this analysis, I will first employ a brief PEST analysis that goes over what I believe are the major external factors behind this newfound interest in the handmade Japanese knife and cooking at home. Then, we will expand on the historical analysis provided in Chapter 2 by looking at key characteristics of Sakai and Seki as knife-making industrial clusters, select brands that are representative of said characteristics, or brands that have started evolving away from that shell of legacy. Through this comparative lens, I hope to show not only how the impressions and contradictions I witnessed in a single street reflect broader currents but also how these two different business models illustrate Japan's ongoing balancing act between legacy craftsmanship and commercial imperatives.

Chapter 4

4.1 The Evolving Macro Environment for Japanese Knives

Washoku, and the home cooking phenomenons

The past two decades have been transformative for the Japanese culinary culture, as it has evolved from a niche into a global phenomenon, the most admired gastronomic tradition worldwide. This shift is a tangible one: according to a report from the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF in short), the number of restaurants that deal in Japanese cuisine has increased nearly eightfold - from the approximately 24.000 stores in 2006, to an exorbitant 187.000 in 2023.⁸⁰ What likely catalyzed this expansion was the insertion of Washoku, the Japanese traditional dietary culture, on the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage list back in 2013. This raised the status of this food culture and consequently, global awareness around it.

A click search on social media like Instagram will inform you that the enthusiasm and interest around the global phenomenon has not died down: the hashtag #japanesefood has accumulated roughly 23.49 million posts. But how does this phenomenon bring us to Japanese handmade knives? The leap is not a long one as often, interest in Washoku has led the masses to discover what specialized cookware and cutlery are so key to an authentic reproduction of Japanese dishes. The 26.05 million posts that have the #homecooking tag alone are testimony enough that the activity is as popular as ever, especially considering how the pandemic has forced millions of people to stay locked in their homes for months (Instagram Analytics, 2024).

The COVID-19 pandemic has in fact, been a major factor at play behind the rise of what the online newspaper INSOURCE (2021) calls the *su-gomori-juyō* (巣ごもり需要) - the “stay-at-home demand”.⁸¹ Millions of workers have been forced to adapt to a new lifestyle of remote and hybrid work - a trend that started in the mid 2010s and significantly accelerated

⁸⁰ Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries of Japan (2023, October 13). *Kagai ni okeru Nihonshoku resutoran-sū no chōsa kekka (Reiwa 5) no kōhyō ni tsuite* (海外における日本食レストラン数の調査結果 (令和5年) の公表について). https://www.maff.go.jp/j/press/yusyutu_kokusai/kikaku/231013_12.html
20-01-2025

⁸¹ Insource (2021-02-6). *Sugomori juyō* (巣ごもり需要). <https://www.insource.co.jp/keywords/nesting-demand.html> 22-01-2025

with the turn of the decade. A look at a survey from 2023, reveals that 67.7% of employees from the IT sector, and 50% of those in consulting now operate primarily from home⁸², and those figures are bound to rise, suggests an article from the World Economic Forum: it is predicted that by 2030 remote workers in digital roles will grow by 25% (to around 92 million). ⁸³And the above positions are characterized by mostly mid-to-high wages; more purchasing power for a generation of stuck-at-home may have very well translated into new interests in upgrading household cooking utensils to truly enjoy that one trending Japanese cuisine recipe they saw buzzing on Instagram.

Building bridges with global audiences

E-commerce is now less of a phenomenon and more of a reality we have gotten accustomed to in the past two decades, with platforms such as Amazon and eBay allowing consumers to access any sort of goods with just a couple clicks - or taps of your smartphone's screen. The annual survey from Eurostat reveals that "in 2022, 91% of people aged 16 to 74 in the EU had used the internet, 75% of whom had bought or ordered goods or services for private use. The proportion of e-shoppers grew from 55% in 2012 to 75% in 2022, an increase of 20%"⁸⁴ and the trend represents itself in the States - with a stable growth year by year of 0.2% since 2000.⁸⁵ Carbonknifeco (USA), Knifewear (Canada), Mido (South Korea), these are just some of the most reputable online stores that have direct access to a wide network of craftsmen and workshops in Japan, they place orders and stock knives, or act as intermediaries between the mass market in each respective region and the makers in Japan. The first two especially yield interesting figures: their respective followings on Instagram (49.000⁸⁶ and 57.000⁸⁷ followers, as of January 2025) are further proof of the interest that online communities have on

⁸² Sherif, A. (2024-02-27). *Percentage of employees who work fully or mostly remote worldwide in 2023, by industry*. Statista. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1451594/remote-work-share-by-industry-globally/> 22-01-2025

⁸³ Masterson, V. (2024-01-9). *More and more jobs can be done from anywhere. What does that mean for workers?* World Economic Forum. <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2024/01/remote-global-digital-jobs-whitepaper> 22-01-2025

⁸⁴ Eurostat (2023-02-28). *E-commerce continues to grow in the EU*. <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/ddn-20230228-2> 23-01-2025

⁸⁵ United States Census Bureau, The Census Bureau of the Department of Commerce. (2024-11-19). *Quarterly retail e-commerce sales report*. <https://www.census.gov/retail/ecommerce.html> 22-01-2025

⁸⁶ Carbon Knife Co. *Carbon Knife Co. [Instagram profile]*. <https://www.instagram.com/carbonknifeco/> 23-01-2025

⁸⁷ Knifewear. *Knifewear [Instagram profile]*. <https://www.instagram.com/knifewear/> 23-01-2025

platforms that can bridge between Japan's best cutleries with an increasing global audience. An enthusiastic home chef in France can now purchase a handcrafted Santoku knife directly from their artisan or region of preference. For Japanese knife makers open to venture in the export market, online retail acts as the shucking knife—prying open the oyster of global opportunity.

Japan itself is also no stranger to this online shopping reality: the Japan Direct Marketing Association (JADMA) reports that in the fiscal year of 2023 online sales reached 13.56 trillion yen - up 6.7% compared to 2022 (JADMA, 2025); the sector maintains a stable average growth of 8.8% every year since 2013.⁸⁸ The global reach that this ever-bustling sector offers to Seki and Sakai workshops, small and big, that relied on regional wholesalers - the ton'ya we met during Edo Japan - has started to reshape this power balance. Producers are now able to showcase their knife offerings not only at local shops or specialty fairs, but also through their own multilingual websites or via open marketplaces like Amazon Japan and Rakuten, as we will see in a later section.

Booming Inbound Tourism and the Weak Yen

One economic factor that must be taken into account is also the rebound of inbound tourism - further amplified by loosened restrictions on traveling in the country and a record-weak yen. The Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO) recorded 31.88 million visitors in 2019⁸⁹, which briefly dipped during the 2 years following the pandemic but rebounded to around 30.19 million by 2024. It is also the JNTO that provides data on average spending per foreign traveler, which has risen to around 57,000 yen per individual, and about 13,000 of it is channeled into “traditional crafts” - a category that has certain and not all knives under it. Nationalities that account for the biggest spenders reflect what I managed to see in my 6 months of groundwork at Kappabashi: China leads, with the United States, Australia, France, and Canada all relatively close (JNTO, 2024)⁹⁰. What further incentivized the spending is Japan's 10% tax refund (or reduction, depending on the store and good): I myself have

⁸⁸ Japan Direct Marketing Association (2024). *Statistics on direct marketing in Japan*. <https://jadma.or.jp/contents/statistics#sales> 20-01-2025

⁸⁹ Japan National Tourism Organization (2024). *Visitor arrivals to Japan and Japanese overseas travelers*. <https://statistics.jnto.go.jp/en/graph/> 20-01-2025

⁹⁰ JNTO (2024), *ibid*

scanned hundreds of passports through PieVAT⁹¹, a third-party app developed to ease the load of work on local customs' offices and save the trouble for visiting tourists, which could conveniently get their hands on the refund 10 minutes after the purchase. The recent health state of the yen is far from the exchange rate of 2019 - 112 yen to the US dollar - since the Pandemic hit, it has been declining towards today's 160 yen to 1 USD. This has made Japanese goods that much more affordable to visiting foreigners, "more inclined to purchase expensive handmade knives, often opting for multiple blades from the same craftsman or even entire sets", notes a store clerk interviewed from the Japanese Times.⁹² Tourist-rich districts like Kappabashi Street have been greatly blessed by this trend: while locals do not even consider any option above the 10.000 yen price, wealthy overseas visitors may very easily go over the 100.000 yen for a premium item. The weak-as-ever yen has been pivotal in injecting new life into the local cutleries and has fueled the appetite for high-spending clientele in the more adventurous knife makers into opening their own stores.



Fig.30: the PIE VAT logo indicates stores enabled for tax free shopping

The Kappabashi microcosm and beyond

All these macro-level forces - global fascination with Japanese cuisine, the reality of e-commerce, a revitalized interest in home cooking, and rebounding tourism - tangibly manifested in my Kappabashi. It is now clear why shops, like the one I worked for, equipped themselves with multilingual staffing, and why more and more specialized knife stores flooded the street, especially in the post-pandemic years: as of today (January 2025) by inputting the word "harmony" (刃物) on Kappabashi Street's official website search, we are presented 46 shops (out of 171)⁹³, a staggering number that explains its fame as "cooking-knife-street". Notable examples of these new stores are Sakai's JIKKO elegant new retail store, opened in 2021, TOJIRO's Knife Gallery in 2023, and the growing retail giant of MUSASHI Japan, which prides three brick-and-mortar stores in Asakusa. That said,

⁹¹ Pievat (2025), *Pievat official website*. <https://pievat.com> 22-01-2025

⁹² Cena, M. (2024). *Weak yen fattens tourist wallets in Japan*. The Japan Times. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/business/2024/05/01/weak-yen-boosts-tourist-wallets/> 23-01-2025

⁹³ Kappabashi Dogu Street Association (2025), *Hamono shops search results* (刃物). <https://www.kappabashi.or.jp/shops/?keyword=刃物> 23-01-2025

Kappabashi is hardly the only example of this phenomenon. Major commercial and tourist districts in Kyoto (around Kawaramachi) house at least 16 known cutlery-specialist stores, intermixed with luxury brands and department outlets. A similar query for “Osaka knife shops” reveals more than 15 specialized retailers near high traffic areas, like Namba’s railway station. This broad presence suggests that knife retailers - large and small - are actively capitalizing on this resurgent traffic. Whether in Tokyo’s Kappabashi, Osaka’s Namba, or Kyoto’s Kawaramachi, these store openings align with the marketing logic of situating themselves amid tourist flows, upscale local consumers, and a broader public newly sensitized to premium cookware. In other words, the strategic choice to open physical stores in Japan’s busiest shopping corridors is a nationwide trend, not limited to Asakusa alone. Retailers and workshop-led brands alike aim to capture in-person impulse buyers, enthusiastic “food tourists,” and everyday shoppers who now perceive Japanese cutlery as an aspirational investment—reinforcing how these macro trends translate into consistent retail expansion in prime urban hubs across the country.

4.2 Sakai: Today’s Market Realities

The “堺打刃物” Trademark and Federation

The 堺打刃物 (Sakai Uchihamono) is a registered trademark at the Japanese Patent Office⁹⁴, that has formally anchored the collective identity of the region’s hand forged blades since its institution on October 5, 2007 (Sakai Cutlery Industry Cooperative Federation, 2007). The trademark functions very much like a geographic indication label, as it assures consumers that blades - cooking knives, foldable knives, scissors - carrying the mark have been crafted accordingly to Sakai’s forging techniques, derived from the Muromachi period and adapted in the following 600 years, as we have talked about in Chapter 2. The Sakai Cutlery Industry Cooperative Federation oversees the designation of and sets the quality benchmarks for workshops applying to use the label. The manufacturing process behind each Sakai Uchihamono knife was born out of the outstanding sword-smiths’ skills, whom with limited resources, produced beautiful katana of the legends; 600 years of smithing have been

⁹⁴ Japan Patent Office (特許庁). (n.d.). *Shōhyō tōroku dai 5081094-gō: Sakai uchihamono* (商標登録第5081094号 堺打刃物). <https://www.jpo.go.jp/system/trademark/gaiyo/chidan/shoukai/ichiran/5081094.html>

skillfully injected in the knives that Sakai prides.⁹⁵ Other than overseeing the trademark, the Federation acts as glue for the local community of workshops, and stimulates its activity as one through marketing events, holding training sessions for those aspiring - although fewer and fewer - young blacksmiths, and acts overall as representative of the knife-making community in municipal meetings. Sakai's biggest strength lies in its division of labor production system, in which the three main steps of making a Sakai cooking knife - forging, sharpening, and handle-fitting - traditionally occur in separate but highly specialized workshops. Each craftsman has been carrying on the family's activity for generations, and it often traces back to the late Edo era. Wholesaler networks, which have operated for almost as long as the workshops themselves, take the load of carrying stock or moving goods to the market off of these families, who can then focus their every effort to the craft. From this relationship, carefully balanced so that the trade and craft could both survive and nurture each other, the renowned Sakai quality associated to the Sakai Uchihamono brand was born. This umbrella approach ensured by the label, supported by Sakai City's local government, helps project the cohesive identity of craftsmanship excellence and historic continuity to domestic and overseas markets.

The Role of Wholesalers and Evolving Challenges

While the Sakai Cutlery Industry Cooperative Federation provides an overarching regional brand identity through the Sakai Uchihamono trademark, it was the network of wholesalers, *ton'ya* that historically have controlled local distribution. Taniguchi enlightens us on the detailed functions of these wholesalers⁹⁶:

1. Quality Assurance:

A high-carbon steel knife, very much like a bottle of wine, ages the longer it is stocked away. By “aging” news crafted blades over time, the steel got harder and more durable. Wholesalers needed a very trained eye in order to discern when the knife had reached hardness worthy of being circulated in the market. Many *tonya* owners

⁹⁵ Japan Patent Office (特許庁), *ibid*

⁹⁶ TANIGUCHI Kanako, UENO Yasuhiro & KITAI Akira (谷口佳菜子, 上野恭裕, 北居明)(2013). *Dentōteki jigyō shisutemu kyōsō yūi to kadai: Sakai, Seki, Tsubame* (伝統的事業システム競争優位と課題・堺、関、燕). *Sakai, Seki, and Tsubame no hamono sangyō no hikaku* (堺・関・燕の刃物産業の比較). Nagasaki International University Academic Institutional Repository.

acquired this ability from an early age, observing forging and sharpening processes at partner workshops.

2. Coordination and Risk Management:

Wholesalers were as skilled as their craftsmen, in finding the right combinations of workshops, matching ones with similar skills. If one sharpeners' backlog caused delays, the wholesaler pivoted to another with matching quality, avoiding disruptions in supplying the market. This allowed the wholesalers to foster a mild competition among the artisans themselves - as they fought for receiving more work, but without pushing any of the shops to a burnout that could lead to a drop in quality. This game of dynamic balancing and matching stabilized the relationship among producers, tying them together under a unified Sakai identity.

3. Financial and Inventory Support:

Wholesalers bore much of the capital burden that derived from holding inventory. Furthermore, tonya served as a safeguard for makers, collecting payments in their stead, and acting as financier for new equipment or finding and feeding apprentices. The "every man to his trade" approach let craftsmen do what they do best, without having to worry about sales or marketing.

4. Information and Brand Coordination:

Being the middleman between craftsmen and the market's demand, ton'ya managed to accumulate tons of data on knife shape, size or desired hardness and customers from both domestic and international market. They would relay each order's specifics without divulging where they would end up being sold: while this helped building a strong regional identity, manifested in Sakai Uchihamono, it left artisans unable to build their individual brand

We have, however, seen how global forces might have changed this historical balance of wholesalers and workshops for good. Why involve tonya's services at all if a workshop can easily make use of digital channels to connect directly to retailers and have merchandise shipped in one to two days? Consequently, some sharpeners or forging shops have started to stock extra blades themselves or even sell online - bypassing altogether the more conventional

ton's route. While directly overseeing sales for a workshop might be a too expensive maneuver - considering the capital needed for packaging and shipping - this more fluid method of conducting business has been eroding the ton's system in an irreversible manner.

Sakai's single-bevel knives have gained a near-monopolistic share of professional Japanese kitchens, as a persistent narrative circling around retail stores, interviews, and blogs affirm that 80-90% of professional chefs own a Sakai knife for their daily service.⁹⁷ The broad consensus in the Japanese culinary industry has Sakai knives being synonymous with the highest level of cuisine in the country, an anecdotal remark that finds truth in the mechanical superiority of single-beveled knives in tasks like filleting fish, preparing お造り or decorating elements. However, an unresolved issue remains with this branding. The regional identity thrives and is at the same time at risk of extinction. Individual workshops struggle to stay in business, as the population ages, potential young apprentices move to the big cities, preferring the comforts of a stable position as white collar to the dirty, taxing work of a blacksmithing workshop. OEM subcontracting from other knife-making regions has further diluted Sakai's direct brand recognition. The efforts to make ends meet for small workshops through this external subcontracting are slowly eating away at Sakai's direct brand recognition. Coupling this fact with the reality that most knives remain fundamentally tools, not highly valued art objects - although there are definitely exceptions - creates a natural ceiling to the price at which these hand-crafted artifacts can be sold for.

Region-Wide Promotional Efforts: Domestic and International

Promotional activity from both the private and public sector is exemplified by Sakai Kitchen's ⁹⁸brand concept, launched in 2021: It integrates multiple crafts, representative of Sakai's artisanal roots - dyed textiles (chūsen, 注染), incense, and cooking knives - under one lifestyle aesthetic. Its launch was overseen by Sakai's municipal government, in particular the Sakai Tourism Board: a few select workshops from each craft are featured on the Sakai Kitchen

⁹⁷ Shokunin.com (n.d.), *Sakai uchihamono no miryoku* (堺打刃物の魅力). <https://www.shokunin.com/jp/morimoto/> 23-01-2025; Jikko Hamono. (n.d.). *Washoku ryōrinin no 8-wari ga erabu "Sakai"* (和食料理人の8割が選ぶ「堺」). <https://www.jikko.jp/c/jikko> 23-01-2025

⁹⁸ Sakai City Government (堺市). (2024). *"Sakai Kitchen" (堺キッチン) shinki nintei shōhin ga kettei shimashita – Shutoken de no puro mōshon o jisshi shimasu* (「sakai kitchen(堺キッチン)」新規認定商品が決定しました –首都圏でのプロモーションを実施します–). https://www.city.sakai.lg.jp/shisei/koho/hodo/hodoteikyoshiryo/kakohodo/teikyoshiryo_r6/r610/061029_02.files/1029_02.pdf 23-01-2025

official website, where visitors are able to learn about the history, techniques, and products of each. Once you are done browsing and ready to pick your product, a purchase link redirects you to Sakai Denshōkan, an online platform where domestic buyers are able to purchase from, and support local craftsman. Interestingly enough, while Sakai Kitchen's website has a fully translated English version, it does not provide fungible links to purchase the goods of interest.

"Sakai kitchen" is also active in organizing events around Japan: one such event was held at Tokyo's Daikanyama, the trendy and quiet "Brooklyn of Tokyo". The fashionable Tsutaya Books hosted the event⁹⁹, during which visitors could freely test Sakai's newest knives on produce and purchase Sakai kitchen branded goods. The brand motto - "to love one's tools is to love one's life" - aims to associate cherishing quality handcrafted instruments with ideas of elevating day-to-day life. As noted above, the absence of an international channel to purchase Sakai kitchen goods indicates how this project is aimed at the domestic market.

In addition to city-driven brands like "Sakai kitchen", in the private sector, a stand-out platform is the "Nihon kōgei dō"¹⁰⁰, a domestic-only e-commerce website that sells among the wide offering of officially designated traditional crafts Sakai knives. The store has an interesting campaign that redirects 1% of all revenue towards training facilities for future artisans - and demonstrates how there is a widespread concern for the constant diminishing of skilled artisans amid the population crisis and the aging workforce of craftsman.

Overseas, Sakai knives can be appreciated at trade fairs, such as the yearly international consumer goods fair held in Frankfurt, the Ambiente. Worthy of note are efforts made directly from the higher level Japanese government, such as the "Craftsmanship of Japan: Sakai Forged Knives", hosted by the Japanese Embassy of Canada¹⁰¹, to promote through forging and sharpening demonstrations of certified *dentō-kōgei-shi* (伝統工芸士) - traditional crafts Master - Takeshi Ino. The event involved culinary schools and Japanese culture enthusiasts and was coordinated by a special guest, Eric Chevalier, a French national first known

⁹⁹ Sakai City Government (2024), *ibid*

¹⁰⁰ Nihon Kōgeidō. (n.d.). *Sakai uchihamono* (堺打刃物). <https://japanesecrafts.com/collections/sakaiuchihamono> 23-01-2025

¹⁰¹ Embassy of Japan in Canada (2022). *Craftsmanship of Japan: Sakai forged knives – Presented by French blacksmith Mr. Eric Chevallier*. https://www.ca.emb-japan.go.jp/itpr_en/Sakai_forged_knives_webinar.html 23-01-2025

foreigner to have apprenticed under a Sakai knife maker. During the Q&A session, when asked about the state of regional knife making and the inevitable shift towards highly machined manufacturing processes, Eric admits that there is genuine quality behind those blades, comparable to Sakai hand forged knives. He also points out how chefs and collectors, enthusiasts and the public crave the performing quality as much as the human story behind their beloved tool. In an industry headed towards industrial mass production, Sakai stands proud as one of the last bastions of hand-forged knives.

Specific Workshops and Their Market Approaches

We will now examine up-close examples of well-known knife companies that range from specialized stores, family-run workshops, and an exemplary modern outlier: this will give us a concrete idea of how Sakai businesses operate in the modern market.

堺一文字光秀 (Sakai Ichimonji Mitsuhide)¹⁰²

Founded by Tanaka Hisaka in 1953, this specialized knife store is one of the better-known Sakai retail brands. In its 60 years of history, it prides a wide offering of over 2000 different knives, with a variety of brands and shapes. Its website is a very informative visit, thanks to its content that documents Sakai's forging, sharpening and handle inserting in extensive detail; it welcomes first-time shoppers, thanks to intuitive guides on the numerous Japanese steel types and their merits, suggestions on what knife to pick depending on a "scenario" of use. The products' list features 142 single-bevel products and 107 Western-style blades, exemplifying how even Sakai makers have opened their workshops to Western influences. True to Sakai tradition, the company does not shy away from referencing on multiple marketing materials the "600 years of forging history". Ichimonji Mitsuhide provides a separate website for its English speaking audience and promotes free shipping for orders over 40,000 yen (around 280 USD), suggesting how online international shoppers are not afraid of spending big bucks on their Sakai knives.

¹⁰² Ichimonji Cutlery. (n.d.). *Ichimonji global website*. <https://global.ichimonji.co.jp> 23-01-2025

馬場刃物製作所 (Baba Hamono)¹⁰³

Established in 1916, Baba Hamono is an exemplary Sakai workshop, which operates through a solid network of veteran craftsman - smiths, sharpener, and handlers. Its website puts emphasis on this division of labor and the crafting methods characteristic of Sakai and illustrates them with vivid details through pictures of machinery and craftsmen as they beat the steel into shape with power hammers in dimly lit surroundings. In order to face the crisis in the workforce, the workshop established in 2017 an in-house sharpening laboratory, where they train new craftsmen and decrease the degree to which they need to rely on external workshops. The online store for Baba Hamono operates via a third-party e-commerce platform (base.ec.) and has everything one might expect from modern cutlery: asymmetrical single-beveled sashimi and deba knives, both in high-carbon and stainless steel, catering to both professionals and home users. Their prices sit around the 8.000 - 15.000 yen for stainless options (machined knives), and 20.000 - 60.000 for their premium carbon-steel offering. Baba Hamono has also shown interest in expanding in the export markets, as they debuted in 2013 at New York's International Restaurant and Food Service Show, but no further international appearance has been registered; the company, as with most traditional Sakai cutleries, has its core customer base in Japanese professionals, knife-enthusiast consumers and cooking hobbyists, judging from the ample product line.

高橋楠 (Takahashi Kusu)¹⁰⁴

Takahashi Kusu, founded in 1917, merges instead an approach of retailing directly to the consumer market, B2C, as well as to those looking to get into the business of knife retailing, through their OEM manufacturing services: it position itself as a seizō-oroshi-kaisha (製造卸会社), a retailer-manufacturer. On one side, it takes orders from outside brands, from other major cutlery regions like Tsubame Sanjō and Seki, that look to expand on their western-style machined knives with Sakai hand-forged wabōchō. On the other, it also manufactures and sells original products to a select base of consumers: they recently launched their successful

¹⁰³ Baba Hamono (馬場刃物). (n.d.). *Baba Hamono official website*. <https://www.baba-hamono.com> 23-01-2025

¹⁰⁴ Takahashi Kusu Co., Ltd. (高橋工業株式会社). (n.d.). *Takahashi Kusu official website*. <https://takahashikusu.co.jp> 23-01-2025

“sen^閃” brand in 2022, debuting it at Paris’s Maison et Objet design fair¹⁰⁵. This line is a fresh of breath air from the stylish Damascus patterns that have flooded both physical and online retail stores, and capitalizes instead on a minimalistic design, married to sustainable messages - a high-quality knife, paired with meticulous care guarantees decades of service. The marketing for this new line sees the endorsement from Paris Michelin-starred chefs, the likes of Thierry Marx, and thus elevated sen^閃 and Sakai knives association with fine-dining imagery. Takahashi Kusu recognized the necessity to expand on the overseas markets, particularly France, and deliberately positioned as a high-profile workshop.

森本刃物製作所 (Morimoto Hamono)¹⁰⁶

Morimoto Hamono is an example of a workshop that focuses purely on one of the three major steps - final sharpening of knife blanks. It does not operate through the direct retail channels, instead on the business market through connections established through its historic wholesaler network. A true example of Sakai’s heritage of labor division, and claims this heritage on the official website where it is stated that “no product inventory is kept”. Morimoto’s blade finishing work underscores how even in today’s e-commerce dominated market, workshops that operate business in the old ways still stand to the test of time.

JIKKO (實光刃物): A Modern Outlier

An outlier in Sakai’s traditional ways of doing knife business is JIKKO (實光刃物 in japanese). JIKKO stands out due to having quickly developed a strong online presence, both domestically and abroad; furthermore it is a vertically integrated business model. Established in 1901 by Itarō Jikkō, its origins a specialized cooking knives’ store just like many other business of the region - which relied on local craftsman for production - but has shown a capability to read the market and adapt with its pivot in 2018 towards integrating manufacturing, stocking, and retailing all under JIKKO’s umbrella. Their first brick-and-mortar store opened its doors in Osaka’s busiest station, Namba, and 7 years later (January 2025), JIKKO prides a total of seven retail stores - with their flagship in Sakai, and other

¹⁰⁵ PR Times. (2024). Sakai uchihamono no shin brand o Furansu de tachiage. Sekai-jū no hitobito kara aisareru koto o mezasu "Sen (閃)" sono senryaku ni komerareta omoi to wa (堺打刃物の新ブランドをフランスで立ち上げ。世界中の人々から愛されることを目指す「sen^閃」その戦略に込められた思いとは). <https://prtimes.jp/story/detail/qx9z6GCpJgr> 24-01-2025

¹⁰⁶ Morimoto Hamono (森本刃物). (n.d.). Morimoto Hamono official website. <http://www.morimotohamono.com> 24-01-2025

branches in Kyoto's Nishiki Teramachi, and Tokyo's Kappabashi Street. It is evident that JIKKO values a direct approach on the consumer market, as it positioned stores in highly trafficked tourist areas. On the side of online marketing, it is no doubt the biggest player among Sakai knife companies: it put all of its chips into online-star sharpener Ryota Togishi, former chef at a luxury resort in Arima, turned content creator and official face of JIKKO in 2021. His style of ASMR sharpening videos have gone viral countless times, and allowed Ryota to collect over 1.2 million followers on Instagram and 320.000 on Facebook¹⁰⁷, where he mainly posts short-format videos featuring the dramatic "before and after" of a sharpening session on Japanese whetstones. One of his most emblematic videos - titled "I couldn't cut the water so I sharpened the knife" - reached over 47 million views, and single handedly captured the global's audience attention with immaculate sharpening, and JIKKO's product.

In contrast to the city's reliance on its typical wholesaler-labor division system, JIKKO has full control over its product, from the very first steps of forging steel, shaping knife blanks, and final sharpening, to packaging and how its knives are put out in the consumer market, a unique and innovative approach in Sakai's knife making scene. It has secured both a strong domestic positioning and appeals to overseas visitors of its physical stores as well as online shoppers, thanks to a carefully crafted webpage, providing all its services of retail, re-sharpening and knife-education in English.

Closing Observations on Sakai

Sakai sees a majority of its knife makers and retailers appealing to the domestic niche of professionals - securing an alleged 80-90% of this domestic market share - and seems to have settled, content, on this segment. The Sakai Uchihamono umbrella brand unifies these makers under the banner of heritage, family business and forging practices old centuries, and municipal campaigns, such as Sakai Kirchen, together with cross-cultural promotional events held abroad exhibit a joint effort in sustaining this craft struggling with an aging workforce and inheritance of craftsmanship.

Outliers like JIKKO signal a possible solution to these issues: moving on from the old wholesaler networks and approaching the knife business with a more contemporary stance, with direct retailing online and in-store, ensures that a brand identity is sustained outside of

¹⁰⁷ Ryota Togishi. (n.d.). *Ryota Togishi [Instagram profile]*. https://www.instagram.com/ryota_togishi/

the regional Sakai label. Instead of risking diluting one's own brand via OEM practices, introducing in-house sales, marketing, and manufacturing, suggests a possible path for the future of Sakai knives.

4.3 Seki: Industrial Scale and Global positioning

Seki's scene: booming exports and the Seki-no-hamono identity

Where Sakai's regional brand relies on its artisanal prestige, domestic demand from professionals, and a relatively small production output, Seki's knife hub has occupied the top position in the scene, through high-volume manufacturing and interest in the export markets since the post-war years. According to the Nagoya Customs Office, Gifu's Seki accounted for roughly 73% of the national knife exports, and 51.8% of the industry's export value, an all-time record: ¥6.1 billion worth of cooking knives have been shipped through Chūbu Airports and Nagoya's port, figures that highlight how Seki stands in a class of its own among national knife-makers¹⁰⁸. In recent history Seki has been able to challenge world-class giants, Sheffield (UK) and Solingen (Germany), through a blended approach of century-old tradition, tracing back to the tradition of Mino-den swordmaking (albeit most modern companies are either first or second generation makers), and post-Meiji resurgence rapid shift to mechanization and industrialization. In similar fashion to Sakai's "Sakai Uchihamono", Seki has developed a made-in-Seki label - "関の刃物" - registered to Japan's Patent Office: "with 700 years of history and crafting techniques passed down from generation to generation, Seki-no-hamono answers the users' trust with durable, functional products, made with the newest steels, and rigorous quality control".¹⁰⁹



Fig. 31: the Seki no Hamono registered trademark

¹⁰⁸ Nagoya Customs (2022), (n. 58)

¹⁰⁹ Japan Patent Office (特許庁). (n.d.). *Shōhyō tōroku dai 5150803-gō: Seki no hamono* (商標登録第5150803号 関の刃物). <https://www.jpo.go.jp/system/trademark/gaiyo/chidan/shoukai/ichiran/5150803.html>

Seki's Rationalized and Global Approach

The defining trait of Seki's cutlery industry is without a doubt its "commitment to rational production"¹¹⁰. The region's makers have always prioritized product lines centered around stainless steel Western-style 洋包丁, due to their affinity with roll-forging, stamping, and laser cutting. In the market's development of the last 3 decades, Seki's unrivaled adaptability on scaling up production, or developing innovative products that satisfy the evolving needs of home cooks and professionals, was enabled by their specialized equipment - computer-controlled lasers, industrial grinders and buffing equipments - and fostered agile responses to consumers' tastes.

The orientation towards export markets - which began with pocketknife shipments to South Korea in 1897 - progressed towards Europe, the U.S, and the Middle East and Asia in Japan's years after the end of the second world conflict, and cemented Seki's global presence. Today's Made in Seki brand strength was born from the choice of local firms during the Tokyo Olympics, who deliberately inserted the Japanese lettering (accompanied by the corresponding English) of Seki Japan on their knives, pamphlets and packagings, to underscore how these products were very different from the Chinese imitations.¹¹¹

Region-Wide Synergy and OEM Collaborations

Seki's strength also lies in its ability to leverage "cross-regional outsourcing": where makers lack facilities or know-how in for example finishing blades, or heat-treating the steel, they dispatch their partially processed knife blanks to specialized workshops in Kochi, Fukui, or Sakai, and in exchange Seki's facilities may produce western knives for these same external regions' brands. As a result, a multi-directional flow of semi-finished knives moves across the various knife hubs of Japan, enabling each local workshop to make ends meet, and expand on their catalogues without compromising on quality: a traditional Sakai workshop, specialized in processing carbon steel, can comfortably rely on Seki's specialized machinery to add say stainless chef knives, that otherwise would struggle on producing.

Seki's approach to acquiring and training new, young talents is also worth discussing. Skills like computing, English, or design are highly sought after in new graduates, as they allow for

¹¹⁰ TANIGUCHI, UENO, KITAI (2013), (n. 96), pag. 37-38-39

¹¹¹ TANIGUCHI, UENO, KITAI (2013), *ibid*, pag. 38-39

the adoption of fresh ideas and contribute to the flexible approach of the region. The award-winning KISEKI¹¹² line from Fukuda Hamono, launched in 2023, was ideated from scratch by a team of young talents with no previous background in knife-making, a success enabled by the experienced guidance of a veteran employee blended with innovative approaches. This contrasts Sakai's decade-long apprenticeship needed in order to become an ichininmae (一人前) - a fully developed craftsman. New hires in Seki receive delegated authority early on, ensuring the system remains functional even when senior staff spend weeks or months traveling abroad to strike deals or participate in trade fairs. In certain cases, Seki manufacturers even invest in the tooling or training of partner artisans in other cutlery hubs, guaranteeing consistent quality across collaborative manufacturing steps (Taniguchi, 2025).

The hybrid “modernity in tradition” strength of Seki

While Seki's marketing materials often take pride in the 800-year legacy, most business in the areas have no direct genealogical continuity with the swordsmiths of the past. The touch of the artisan intervenes in Seki's blades only in the final steps of production: after a knife blank has been machine-stamped, or laser-cut, a veteran craftsman will handle buffing, polishing and sharpening. This allows Seki knives to be marketed as hand-made products, and weave in the “samurai-era heritage” so key to the success of Seki knives' success on the export markets; a calculated maneuver that allowed Japan's largest exporting region to carve itself a niche hard to rival, since Solingen and Sheffield were industrialized realities from the start.

Notable Seki Makers: Industrial Approaches and Global Branding

Ohzawa Seisakusho - “折れず曲がらずよく切れる”

Ōzawa Seisakusho is the perfect example of the hybrid approach that characterizes Seki knife makers. It is a mid-sized workshop, which prides its origins in the manufacture of replica swords - *mozōtō* (模造刀) - and has translated the traditional techniques of sharpening katanas into razor-sharp edges of its kitchen knives, as the company stepped into the cooking knives industry in 2001, with the launch of in-house manufactured 関龍作 and 関兼信作 lines. The latter is a line especially popular among foreign chefs, as it provides the whole offering of

¹¹² Good Design Award (グッドデザイン賞), (2023), *Jushō gyararī: Chōkō gōkin hōchō KISEKI* (キセキ) (受賞ギャラリー 超合金包丁 KISEKI: (キセキ)). <https://www.g-mark.org/gallery/winners/14557?text=包丁> 12-01-2025

wabōchō - Deba, Yanagiba, Usuba, and Takohiki - at a relatively affordable price range, between ¥12.900 and ¥29.000 a piece, considering they are hand-forged one by one by the company's craftsman. Seki-ryū-saku has more appeal on the domestic market, as it is ranged in prices as low as ¥1.650-¥2.540, catering towards home cooks looking for stainless all-purpose options. Following its international expansion in 2013, with Ōzawa's debut at Frankfurt's Messe Ambiente, the company has been redirecting most of its efforts on the more profitable exports market: by 2023, the firm reported successful results in that sense, as it had exported to 50 countries; it celebrated this success with the opening of a new grinding facility for knives and swords in Oze City. Ozawa's origins in sword-making - albeit replicas - gave the firm a branding advantage that few other workshops can boast: direct experience in the craft of sword-smithing puts Ozawa above competitors that emptily declare their connection with Seki's Mino-den lineage.

KAI: Balancing Industrial Scale with Precision

With KAI, we move away from the mid-sized workshops and venture into the territory of giants. Its history traces back to the origin of the father company of KAI, Feather Safety Razors (フェザー安全剃刀), co-founded in 1908 by Saijirō Endō. The following decades saw Feather split into its sales and manufacturing departments, navigated through a demand crisis in the years after the Pacific War, expanded into making foldable knives, and eventually settled in 1982 with a rebranding in KAI Corporation, which unified at first sales and production under one logo, officially adopting it in 1988. It had by then ventured into all sorts of fields: safety razors, foldable knives, beauty products, medical precision blades, and cooking knives¹¹³. Today, KAI has evolved into an umbrella organization with two main bodies: KAI Industries (manufacturing) and KAI Corporation (sales). In March 2024, the group registered a record profit of 273 billion yen and stands at the top of Gifu's industrial groups.¹¹⁴ While KAI has not made publicly available exact sales figures of its cooking knives' venture, an interview uploaded by content creator oiri_kitchen reveals interesting information on KAI's culinary lineup. The interviewee is Hayashi Yasuhiko, a veteran employee at KAI and currently tasked with producing content on KAI's "Kireaji-channel" on

¹¹³ MORIOKA (2016), pag. 136-7-8

¹¹⁴ KAI Group (具印株式会社). (2024). *Kaisha gaiyō* (会社概要). <https://www.kai-group.com/global/about/company.html> 12-01-2025

YouTube. When asked about his beginnings at KAI, Hayashi-san depicts in detail how cooking knives were sold and displayed in Japan's malls of the 80s: these home centers were major outlets but offered little variety on blade types - around 10 to 20 brands - and clearly prioritized affordability over quality, with most knives being under ¥1.000. Furthermore, customer experience was rather lacking, as one could not test the knives, or was not provided with any explanation about the price difference between an affordable 1.000 yen blade, and a 15.000 yen one; post-purchase experience was not integral, as sharpening services were not available in these malls. KAI saw these weaknesses as inspiration to create its own retail experience in these malls - the KAI Shop (貝シヨツプ). Trained staff would guide customers through test cuts, steel, and performance differences and identify among the 100-plus options the one that fit each individual. On top of this, the KAI shop was the first of its kind to provide in-store sharpening (for a premium). KAI planned beyond sales, to gain customers trust and positioned itself as a service provider as well. This curated, interactive experience is today the standard adopted in all knife-retailing stores¹¹⁵.

KAI's culinary lineup of knives has two main lines:

- **Shun (旬)** : a premium cutlery line aimed at international customers. Starting at ¥14.900 and higher, Shun prides sales in the range of 5 million pieces (Oiri, 2025). The product's popularity stems from its sleek all-stainless VG-10, hammered patterns, and Damascus finishes. Oval wooden handles, full-body tangs and a robust build of Western inspiration meets Japanese sharpening know-how in this legendary lineup.
- **Seki Magoroku (関孫六)** : caters to the domestic market, the Seki Magoroku lineup has evocative images of Muromachi swordsmithing at the core of its marketing materials. Its good balance between cost (around the ¥5.090, depending on the model) and performance, the full-stainless body, and ability to resist even in the dishwasher allowed Seki Magoroku's all-stainless Santoku Shōzō (匠創) to become the top-selling knife in Japan, says Hayashi in the interview.

¹¹⁵ Oiri_kitchen (2025). [Sen'nyū] KAI Kabushiki-gaisha honsha | "Seki Magoroku" no yurai | Kireaji channel – Hayashi Yasuhiko 「Oku-tan'i no uriage yori 500-en no yorokobi」 ([潜入]貝印株式会社_本社 | 「関孫六」の由来 | 切れ味チャンネル_林泰彦「億単位の売り上げより500円の喜び」) [YouTube video]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yYB03kaE9V8&t=1016s> 2-01-2025

KAI has also involved famed chefs in launching collaboration projects, like the Michel Bras co-developed line of titanium-coated knives, with more refined edge geometries and handle ergonomics that clearly benefit professionals. According to Hayashi-san's remarks¹¹⁶, the company's marketing rests on two pillars: domestically, Seki Magoroku resonates with home cooks familiar with Seki's tradition, while overseas, it appeals to fine-dining chefs and knife-enthusiasts, with a "boutique" like experience. KAI's creation of separate brand pages for each product line it puts out allows for parallel product strategies that would run against each other.

KAI's 12-Step Knife Manufacturing: Automation meets hand-made

KAI's top-of-the-industry manufacturing process involves heavy use of CNC (Computer Numerical Control) software, laser cutters, and machined-forging, and generates added value through the employment of work by hand in final edge sharpening and quality checks. This method strongly resonates with Seki's "modern meets tradition" noted across many workshops of the region. Below is a detailed breakdown of each of the 12 steps of KAI's knife manufacturing¹¹⁷:

1. Laser cutting: computer-controlled laser cutters shape sheets of stainless steels into the desired blade outlines, with higher precision than simple metal presses. Furthermore, this method avoids causing micro-changes in the steel's hardness
2. Heat treating: blanks enter an electric furnace, are tempered at around 1000°C, then cooled at room temperature. This step increases the steel's hardness and stabilizes the internal structure. Then, exposed to a sub-zero shock (about -80°C), and a subsequent heating at 180°C ensures that hardness is uniform across the knife.
3. Outer-lines grinding and tapering: the perimeter of the knife is refined to the general shape of the desired knife, through computer-guided specialized belts. Tapering - the thinning from spine to edge - is done with similar machinery, and at the end of this step

¹¹⁶ Oiri_kitchen (2025), ibid

¹¹⁷ KAI Group (貝印株式会社). (n.d.). *PROCESS: KITCHEN KNIVES*. <https://www.kai-group.com/global/kai-factory/process/kitchen-knives/> 3-01-2025

the knife's foundational geometry is set. Damascus patterns begin to emerge as the belts grind through the many layers of steel.

4. Glazing: in Japanese “刃均し”, smoothens out the rough geometries created in the previous step, into the traditional “clam-like” cross section, essential to the sharp feel characteristic of modern Japanese knives. This also prepares the ground for subsequent finishing.
5. Bolster welding: a bolster, a small piece of steel added at the juncture point between the blade and handle, is welded onto the tang. This aids water resistance as it ensures no gaps where liquids may infiltrate the handle are left.
6. Shot-blasting and mirror polishing: tiny glass beads are pressure-shot on the blade's surface to create a mirror-like finish, achieving a nearly reflective finish. This step is where Damascus knives reveal their final layered patterns, and acid etching creates the contrasty design unique of KAI's knives.
7. Assembly: the handle - a laminate wood composite - is securely attached to the tang and bolster, and tightly sealed to create a moisture-free space. Metal injection molding techniques are employed on the higher-end lines, such as Shun, to create a seamless fitting with the handle.
8. Handle and bolster polishing: from this step intervene the specialized craftsman, which operate different grades of buffing machinery to refine the handle's shape and texture, replicating a comfortable sensation when gripped. Both bolster and butt cap if present are polished to match the finish of the blade.
9. Branding: each blade is branded with KAI's logo, by using a laser marking machine. The branded characters also ensure that each blade can be tracked back to its steel batch, production date and the artisans that worked on the knife.
10. Wet-sharpening: only high-end lines - Damascus series and Shun - are sharpened to a couple of micron-thin edges, through the use of “wet-sharpening”, a step ideated by KAI's sharpening artisans.

11. Inspection and boxing: the burr - excess steel that sticks to edge of the knife after sharpening - is removed by stroking it on tanned leather, the edge geometry is checked one last time, before the knife is packaged, ready to be shipped.
12. Completion: knives that reach this 12th step are deemed market-ready.

KAI as a Pillar of Seki's Global Strategy

The region's top player in KAI stands as the core pillar of Seki's regional knife-making scene. Its mostly machine-controlled manufacturing ensures that each blade respects KAI's high-quality specs, while the final sharpening and controls overseen by specialized craftsmen ensure that an added value is created, making KAI's knife lines the perfect blend of machine precision and traditional Japanese craftsmanship. KAI is a perfect example of how a balanced approach, stemming from its refusal to sacrifice its handcrafting beginnings, made it a brand loved both domestically and internationally. KAI and Seki knife-makers are the result of tradition meeting modernity, a compromise that does not infer on the quality of the final product.

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Final Considerations: Divergent Paths and Shared Futures

When we began this journey, I posed several core questions: who preserved Japanese knife-making and how, across centuries of history? How did the craft endure, holding onto its specialized know-how? And - with a look at today's retail dynamics - how do these passed-down traditions translate and manifest in the marketing and sales approach of modern stores and knife-making clusters of Sakai and Seki?

With Chapter 1, we have demonstrated how the Japanese cooking knife - the *hōchō* - did, in fact, emerge from adapted designs and techniques of swordsmithing, in particular during the upheavals of Japan's Medieval period. Over these tumultuous years, forging communities took root in Sakai and Seki, each shaped by what resources they had available locally. Even with the bullish influences of Western cuisine entering the country during the Meiji era, Japanese cutleries clung to their superior tool designs.

We have seen, in the case of Sakai, how much of the region's traditional knife-making preservation is owed to the division of labor system and the intricate relationship between the workshops and the wholesalers. The former passed along the secret of each craft through master-apprentice lines, while the latter provided the financial means for the system to stand. Yet, this system is now facing struggles that cannot be solved with simple injections of capital or by capturing more demand: the aging workforce and diminishing interest in decade-long apprenticeships, the overshadowing of individual workshops' brands due to the necessary evil that are the OEM deals with external firms, they all call for a coordinate action from the Sakai Cutlery Federation, paired with city-promoted initiatives such as Sakai Kitchen.

JIKKO's example is but an outlier - as the "fully integrated" approach, where all the production steps are transferred in-house, while they are indeed a path to success, it requires a substantial investment of capital, clever positioning and a willingness to risk the survival of one's workshop by deviating away from the traditional comforts offered by the *ton'ya* network.

On the other hand, Seki's story is one of success, as the region's typical mass production blended with a certain degree of retained hand-finishing craftsmanship enabled firms to appeal to international and domestic customers alike through the association with Mino-den

swordsmithing and genuine quality knives. Makers like KAI have essentially reinvented the Japanese cooking knife, not in the final product - as it exhibits blade designs of the past two centuries - but in the way it is manufactured, with the implementation of advanced laser-cutting and similar CNC machinery.

The Seki knives created its unique niche in well-defined and regulated processes, constant innovation, and a will to seek collaborations with objectively more skilled regions through OEM subcontracting, granting thus to the region of Seki more than half of the national export volume. “Made in Seki” is a force to be reckoned with across foreign markets, as it commands enormous brand recognition.

Both clusters have exhibited equally valid models of operating in the modern knife market, albeit each with its own challenges and compromises. But alternative sustainable paths, which were not touched upon in this research but would make for an interesting subject of research, do exist in the Japanese knife-making scene: Fukui’s Takefu Knife Village is the result of a blacksmithing community-wide effort, a cooperative approach that has been drawing a lot of attention, locally and domestically, as it provides spaces for craftsmen to operate their craft, and train new young promising blacksmiths, without the economical strains of expanding their existing workshops.

What has remained barely unchanged are the values that make up a quality Japanese knife: mechanical functional birthed from the ingenuity of intrinsic to the craft, and artistic design, the heritage of swordsmithing. A heritage that is part nostalgia, part an inseparable trait in the DNA of these blades.

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