Sustainable Transformability Possible among Traditional Companies:
A case of Japanese Traditional Brush Maker

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore major factors that make it possible to sustain traditional regional-based companies. The paper identifies not only the importance of company routine but the flexibility to refine it through unlearning/relearning processes. The company routine helps develop a platform for innovation. Managers find success by breaking with tradition when the platform allows for transformative adaptability. This transformation is the cyclical evolution caused when companies confront the dilemma or pressure between tradition and innovation or localization and globalization.

In other words, we can consider that ‘routine’ is the manifestation of what companies have learned by unlearning and relearning what they have acquired, and learning is a daily practice and a lifelong activity. Routine does not remain fixed and is constituted through the process of organizational learning. The process of organizational learning based on knowledge competences is ‘innovation’. Innovation that leads to creation serves as a grounding for each company’s existence. Paradoxically innovation lies hidden in tradition. Tradition can be described as the seeds of creation.

We employ a case study approach. We examine the case of HAKUHODO**, a small-to-midsize company located in Kumano, Hiroshima, Japan. HAKUHODO maintains its tradition as a fude maker. HAKUODO, however, has converted traditional techniques into creative new products creating new demands and customer needs. We try to rediscover those companies’ heritage through this case. Tradition itself breaks down the wall of tradition. It is handing down of traditions.

The main source for this paper is interviews at HAKUHODO and related organizations, in addition to literature-based study.