

Living heritage safeguarding and the capacity building of intangible cultural heritage industries: the case of *honba yuki tsumugi*

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ABSTRACT

Intangible cultural heritage (hereafter 'ICH') practices are living heritage, a result of active creation by ICH bearers, inheritors, consumers, organisations and other stakeholders. The particular focus of this paper is *honba yuki tsumugi*, a traditional silk-weaving technique practised in Japan's neighbouring Ibaraki and Tochigi prefectures and recognised as a National Important Intangible Cultural Property and a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage element. Production of *honba yuki tsumugi* has been in steady decline since the 1990s, which has led to the development of numerous initiatives to support the capacity building of amateur *yuki tsumugi* craftspeople. With ethnographic data of *honba yuki tsumugi* as a base, this research clarifies the present state of the craft, as well as the challenges it poses in terms of capacity building and safeguarding efforts. *Honba yuki tsumugi* is a unique case study because it is a single industry, or a

single set of ICH folk-craft techniques, whose production region encompasses two prefectures (jurisdictions). Each side of the border has its own contrasting approach to safeguarding, here categorised as safeguarding as a cultural industry and preserving as cultural heritage. These perspectives on safeguarding and the challenges faced in the production region are discussed in order to provide an understanding of how an ecosystemic view of intangible heritage industries based on the relationships between stakeholders can support the safeguarding of an ICH industry as living cultural heritage.

Keywords

Honba yuki tsumugi, Japan, heritage ecosystems, traditional crafts, weaving, living heritage, heritage safe-guarding, capacity building, cultural heritage industries

Introduction

Intangible cultural heritage practices do not exist solely within the individual. The 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage makes this clear in its emphasis on the role of 'communities' and 'generations' of stakeholders in cultural safeguarding. The multiplicity of relationships that coalesce to create intangible cultural heritage can be observed very clearly in ICH industries, where even the most basic links such as raw material–craftsperson, or producer–consumer, can be viewed more widely as a complex web of relations.

The particular focus of this study is *honba yuki tsumugi*, a traditional silk-weaving technique practised in Japan's neighbouring Ibaraki and Tochigi prefectures (see [Figure 1](#)). *Honba yuki tsumugi* was designated as a National Important Intangible Cultural Property in 1956, a Japanese Traditional Craft in 1977, and a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage element in 2010. Regardless of these recognitions, production of *honba yuki tsumugi* has been in steady decline due to the aging population of craftspeople, indifference among young people, and a drop in demand for kimono (Kunisue 2012, 66) – which is what

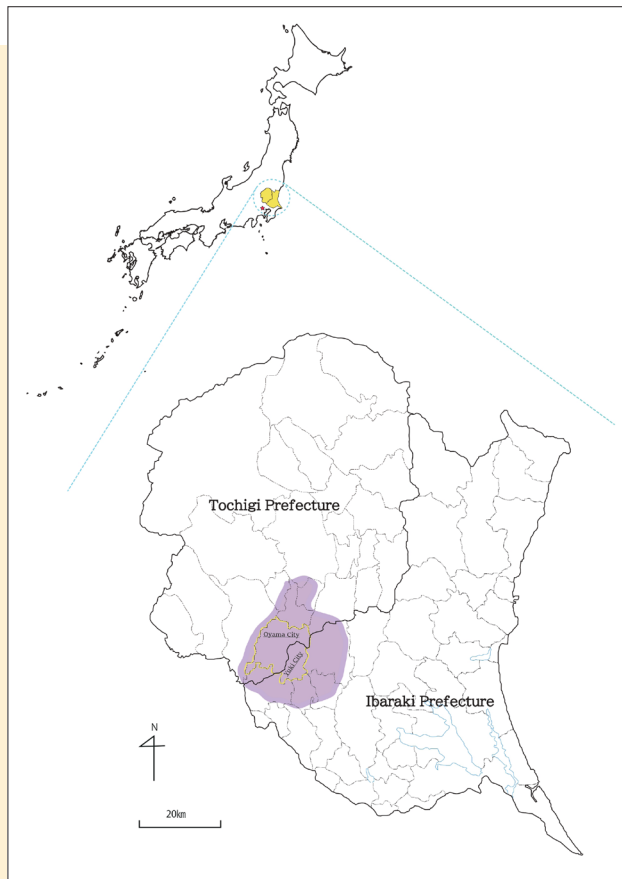


Figure 1
Honba yuki tsumugi production region.
 Source: Map by the author.

the textile is primarily used for (see [Figure 2](#)).

Honba yuki tsumugi is a unique case study because it is a single industry, or a single set of ICH folk-craft techniques, whose production region is divided by a prefectural border. This jurisdictional boundary creates two separate production systems, as well as two separate safeguarding systems. This division has long existed in the craft's history but was first officially recognised in the designation of *honba yuki tsumugi* as a National Important Intangible Cultural Property in 1956. It was further asserted upon the 1975 revision of the Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties, in which it was pronounced that every designated intangible cultural property has to have an assigned 'bearer'. While most cultural property-bearing communities responded to this amendment to the law by registering one such person, Ibaraki and Tochigi prefectures selected six official *honba yuki tsumugi* bearers. The bearers included two string-pullers, two *kasuri kukuri* craftspeople and two weavers

– one set from each of the two prefectures (Okuzawa 1984, 60). This prefectural division trickles down into capacity building as well, where two sets of centres, teachers and organisations create their own separate capacity-building initiatives. Each prefectural system has a different approach to the safeguarding of *honba yuki tsumugi*, so that, in this paper, they are categorised as 'safeguarding as a cultural industry' and 'preserving as cultural heritage'. The existence of two systems is proof of how the dynamic and lived nature of intangible cultural heritage allows for a multiplicity of cultural interpretations, enabling stakeholders to express and enact their diverse and often opposing views. However, this duality tends to cause strict separations between stakeholders and limits capacity-building initiatives only to those that focus on individual craftspeople.

In this study, intangible cultural heritage is viewed as a 'living heritage ecosystem' that is actively created by its constituents – which include, but are not limited to, its bearers, inheritors, consumers, government entities, and organisations involved in its safeguarding.

The 'essence of culture' is that it is created through people's activities and is inherited while being transformed by social conditions. If culture alone is preserved, without the people who play this role ... what is protected is only the result of the cultural activity (not the cultural activity itself). In my view, this is not cultural protection in the true sense of the term. (Takakura 2022, 226; translation by the author)



Figure 2
Honba yuki tsumugi kimono made by Oyama city's *tsumugi* artisans, on display at the Oyama City Craft Center.
 Source: Photo by the author.

By preserving only the cultural result, without the living process of cultural activities or their ever-evolving bearers, intangible culture is no longer living heritage and cannot be considered safeguarded. In the case of crafts and craft industries, the 'cultural result' would be the tangible craft product, which, when separated from the producers that hold the intangible knowledge needed to create the craft, is no longer a living culture. Apart from the preservation of tangible cultural products, capacity building, or the securing and educating of the human capital that makes up the next generation of bearers, is essential for safeguarding intangible culture as living culture.

Intangible cultural heritage industries as ecosystems

Honba yuki tsumugi is a cultural material woven using methods that have been recognised as intangible cultural heritage – but it is also a product whose sale is crucial for the livelihood of its producers. A cultural subject of an economic process, this paper views *honba yuki tsumugi* as an ICH industry. The use of intangible cultural heritage and related creative industries as a resource has been explored thoroughly as a source of local development (Dellisanti 2023; Drummond 2021) and sustainable tourism (Papadaki et al. 2025; Arcos-Pumarola et al. 2023). Yet, visualisations of ICH as an industry have been criticised for paving the way to processes of cultural objectification (Iida 2022, 333) and for focusing on physical products or production rates while ignoring the producing community (Vadi 2018). From a very different perspective, in a 1983 interview regarding the 'cultural industry' of Japanese lacquerware, Yamagishi (co-chairman of the Japan *Urushi* Association) stated that the responsibility for developing a cultural industry lies in the hands of individual craftspeople (Nishikawa and Yamagishi 1983, 8). This paper strives to find a middle ground between the above perspectives – focusing on the production community who act as the bearers of an intangible cultural industry, while attempting to grasp what lies beyond the individual craftspeople. In the abovementioned interview, Yamagishi also states that individual craftspeople have the agency and ability to influence their craft. While this view does have merit, an industry does not consist of craftspeople (producers) alone. Rather, it is a dense collection of actors and the relationships between them, which here is understood as a craft 'ecosystem'.

Use of the term 'ecosystem' is meant to emphasise viewing a craft and its production region holistically. In

the case of *honba yuki tsumugi*, this interpretation means widening one's considerations to include all the major actors, in both Ibaraki and Tochigi prefectures, and their network of relationships and interactions. As a first step in understanding the industry's production ecosystem, this paper chooses to focus on human actors – more specifically, those who are connected to the capacity building of *honba yuki tsumugi* – though, admittedly, a more complete view of the ecosystem would also include non-human actors and processes that form the biological or environmental context of the craft.

Li et al. (2023) applied a similar 'ecosystemic' conceptualisation to the ceramics industry in the United Kingdom, linking together experts, amateurs, craft classrooms, museums and galleries to create a more complete image of the breadth and complexity of the contemporary ceramics industry. Hwang and Huang (2019) studied indigenous Taiwanese Seediq weaving and observed that weaving is only one part of the Seediq cultural ecosystem, which additionally includes knowledge of nature, historical memories, spiritual beliefs, understandings about family, and so on. New weaving techniques, as well as the practice of traditional techniques without the context of the entire Seediq cultural ecosystem, are 'technique(s) without culture' (Hwang and Huang 2019, 15). Hence, in order to safeguard the cultural heritage of Seediq weaving, the entire cultural ecosystem needs to be considered, not just the weaving techniques themselves. Most recently, ICOMOS Japan's 2025 Gunma Declaration on Heritage Ecosystems attempts to create a framework for interdisciplinary heritage management that connects multilayered interpretations of heritage to develop new understandings of authenticity and to link heritage's social, natural and cultural environments.

The research for this paper took place shortly before the Gunma Declaration and takes inspiration from the abovementioned papers and their use of the term 'ecosystem' to refer to a holistic, interconnected view of cultural industries and, more specifically, of the *honba yuki tsumugi* production system. The paper argues that in order for *honba yuki tsumugi* to continue to exist as a living heritage, safeguarding and capacity-building initiatives need to grasp the production region not as a collection of disconnected individuals, but as an entire production ecosystem formed of relationships between stakeholders.

Research aims and methodology

With ethnographic data of *honba yuki tsumugi* as a base, this research clarifies the present state of the craft, as well as the challenges faced in its capacity-building and safeguarding efforts. Safeguarding efforts are categorised as taking two contrasting approaches – safeguarding as a cultural industry and preserving as cultural heritage – and are discussed in order to provide a deeper understanding of how intangible heritage industries can be safeguarded as living cultural heritage.

To understand both the Ibaraki prefecture and Tochigi prefecture sides of the entire ecosystem, this study uses a rudimentary framework of three layers of stakeholders. Roughly, these layers are divided into bureaucratic stakeholders (macro); organisations related to sale, education and cooperation (middle); and craftspeople (micro). These 'layers' are purposefully given the simple labels of 'macro', 'middle' and 'micro', with the idea that one can interchange stakeholders based on the perspective from which they view the production ecosystem. Rather than defining the production ecosystem, layers here are used as a simplified visual tool for analysis. With this layered framework as a skeleton for visualising the ecosystem, the study utilised literature review, semi-structured interviews and participant fieldwork at capacity-building sites. Semi-structured interviews of capacity-building stakeholders (*shimaya*, *hataya* and cooperative leaders, instructors and staff at capacity-building centres, amateur craftspeople who have taken part in capacity-building programmes) were conducted in person by the author between February and December 2024. Interviews were conducted fully in Japanese and lasted approximately an hour. Participant fieldwork involved regular attendance at capacity-building programmes open to the public in both Ibaraki and Tochigi prefectures over the span of 18 months between June 2023 and December 2024. (Programmes attended included monthly string-pulling courses held in Oyama City and *honba yuki tsumugi* exhibits and demonstrations held in Yuki City and Oyama City.)

This paper begins with an overview of *honba yuki tsumugi* and then describes the macro and middle layers of each prefecture. Regardless of the differences between the macro and middle layers of each prefecture, craftspeople in the *honba yuki tsumugi* industry ultimately face the same challenges. As such, the micro layer is discussed as one and will be seen as the 'target' or 'receiving end' of capacity-building systems created by the layers above

them. Finally, the conclusion will discuss and analyse the connections and separations within the industry, and the importance of an ecosystemic view for the safeguarding of the craft.

Honba yuki tsumugi

Honba yuki tsumugi is produced across the Ibaraki and Tochigi prefectural border, with the highest concentrations of craftspeople gathering in Yuki City (Ibaraki prefecture) and Oyama City (Tochigi prefecture). To break down the craft's name, '*honba*' means 'authentic' (referring to the fact that this is the original or 'real' *yuki tsumugi*). '*Tsumugi*' is an umbrella term for all Japanese traditional silk pongee textiles; and '*yuki*' refers to this specific kind. There are regional forms of *tsumugi* with deep histories located all across Japan, but what distinguishes *honba yuki tsumugi* from other *tsumugi* is that it has retained its original, entirely handmade process.

Based on archaeological evidence, it can be presumed that the technology used to create *honba yuki tsumugi* has existed in the region since the Kofun period (circa 250–710 CE; Shimotsuke City 2023). The first written records of *yuki tsumugi* come from the Nara period (710–784 CE), when it was produced from silk cocoons that were misshapen or dirty, or otherwise would have been thrown away, and fibres were dyed in rudimentary colours using indigo. Handmade and of a high quality regardless of the low status of its materials, this cloth was produced during offseasons for use in durable work clothing (Yuki History Editors Committee 1995, 320–321). Hundreds of years later, in the Muromachi period (1336–1573), *yuki tsumugi* shifted to being produced from high-quality silk cocoons and was sent as an offering from the local Yuki clan to the shogun. (This is also the origin of the cloth's name – *yuki tsumugi* was *tsumugi* sent from the Yuki clan.). As word spread across Japan of *yuki tsumugi*'s reputation as being a high-quality kimono, demand grew, and the production of *yuki tsumugi* became a profitable practice. Due to the efforts of local craftspeople, *honba yuki tsumugi* production techniques were transmitted in their original form over the following hundreds of years, the most critical period in its history being during World War II. In 1956, the unchanged production methods of *honba yuki tsumugi* were formally recognised by the Japanese government, and it was registered as a National Important Intangible Heritage Property.

Shortly after *honba yuki tsumugi* was honoured with National Important Intangible Heritage status, the national economy began to grow, and Japan became a global economic power. During the prosperous second half of the Showa period (1926–1989), a rise in consumerism brought such an increase in demand for *honba yuki tsumugi* that agricultural families who had until then been producing it on the side as additional income were now making more money from *honba yuki tsumugi* than from their crops. Many such households quit farming and switched exclusively to producing *honba yuki tsumugi* (Yuzawa 2009, 37–38). This growth came to a halt within a decade and then crashed as the Japanese economic bubble burst.

From raw silk to honba yuki tsumugi

The production process of *honba yuki tsumugi* has over 30 steps, which are all done entirely by hand. Of these 30, three are highlighted in the craft’s UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage and National Important Intangible Cultural Property designation: the pulling of string from silk cocoons, *kasuri kukuri* dyeing, and back-strap loom weaving.

Since its earliest recorded existence, *honba yuki tsumugi* has been a product of divided labour. A string-puller only pulls string, a *kasuri kukuri* craftsman only does *kasuri kukuri*, and so on. In the early days of *honba yuki tsumugi*, when it was produced exclusively within

agricultural families, every family member would have their own task in the production process. As the region gained prosperity and production increased, production tasks divided further, leading to the development of an industry run primarily by three specialty businesses: *itoya*, *hataya* and *shimaya*.

Shimaya are wholesale stores that interact with customers and receive orders, which they then pass on to a *hataya*. *Hataya* are companies of weavers. A nuclear family is at the core of a *hataya*, with ‘outsider’ weavers hired to make up the necessary manpower. In the past, on receiving an order, a *hataya* would purchase the necessary strings from an *itoya* – a store that serves as a ‘middleman’, supplying string-pullers with raw silk materials and then purchasing prepared string. Currently, there are no remaining *itoya* in the Yuki region and the role of *itoya* is now being fulfilled by *hataya*, or larger *shimaya*. Pulled string is handed over with a desired design to a *kasuri kukuri* craftsman (who may work together with a dyer). *Kasuri kukuri* is a form of resist dyeing, where portions of strings are selectively dyed in a way that a pattern is formed once the strings are woven. When *kasuri kukuri* dyeing is completed, the string is passed on to the *hataya* and the textile is woven. *Honba yuki tsumugi* is woven on manual backstrap looms, which are low to the ground, with a strap that a weaver wraps around their back to pull or loosen to control the tension on the strings being woven. Once

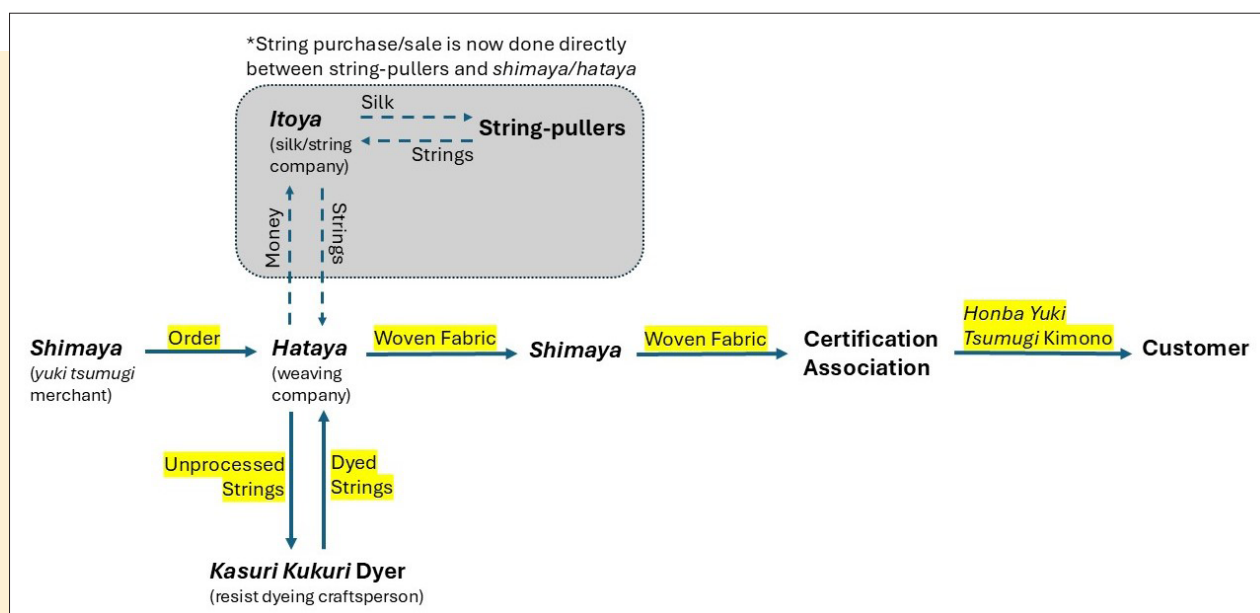


Figure 3
Simplified overview of the *honba yuki tsumugi* production process.
Source: Created by the author.

woven, the textile is delivered to the *shimaya* and then sent for inspection. If it passes inspection, the textile is certified as *honba* and is ready for sale (see Figure 3).

Two prefectural systems

Ibaraki prefecture

To briefly summarise the Ibaraki prefecture production system (see Figure 4), the 'macro' level consists of the Ibaraki prefectural government and the Yuki City government. These actors manage and distribute funds from the Agency of Cultural Affairs to middle-layer actors; connect *honba yuki tsumugi* stakeholders with the stakeholders of other prefectural crafts for joint craft events; and plan promotional events within Yuki City.

The 'middle' layer consists of the Ibaraki prefecture Textile and Macromolecule Research Center (hereafter 'the Research Center'), cooperatives and *shimaya*. Though its functions have changed greatly throughout the years, the current main role of the *Yuki Tsumugi* division of the Research Center is the capacity building of amateur weavers, especially through their annual year-long training course. They only accept as many students

as they can then eventually find employment for, so their enrolment numbers are generally very low. While traditional backstrap loom weaving is their main focus, they also teach 'more efficient' floor loom methods and plan to expand their programme to mechanised methods as well (interview with author). The core cooperative in Ibaraki prefecture is the Ibaraki prefecture *Honba Yuki Tsumugi* Producers' Association, which is a collective of the Ibaraki prefecture *hataya*. Alongside a general goal of promoting *honba yuki tsumugi*, this cooperative is in charge of linking Research Center programme graduates to *hataya* jobs – in this way, they theoretically also set the number of students of the year-long training course, as they tell the prefecture how many spots their *hataya* will have available. The final actors categorised in this 'layer' are *shimaya*. As previously described, as part of the division of labour in *honba yuki tsumugi* production, producers do not sell their products directly to customers – the purchase and sale of bolts of fabric is the role of *shimaya*. Since the bursting of Japan's economic bubble and the drop in sales of *honba yuki tsumugi*, the position of *shimaya* as the one entry point for customers (and, thus, for capital) into the industry has made them more powerful and has indirectly given them the role of overseeing the coordination of the entire production process. *Shimaya* also host *yuki tsumugi*

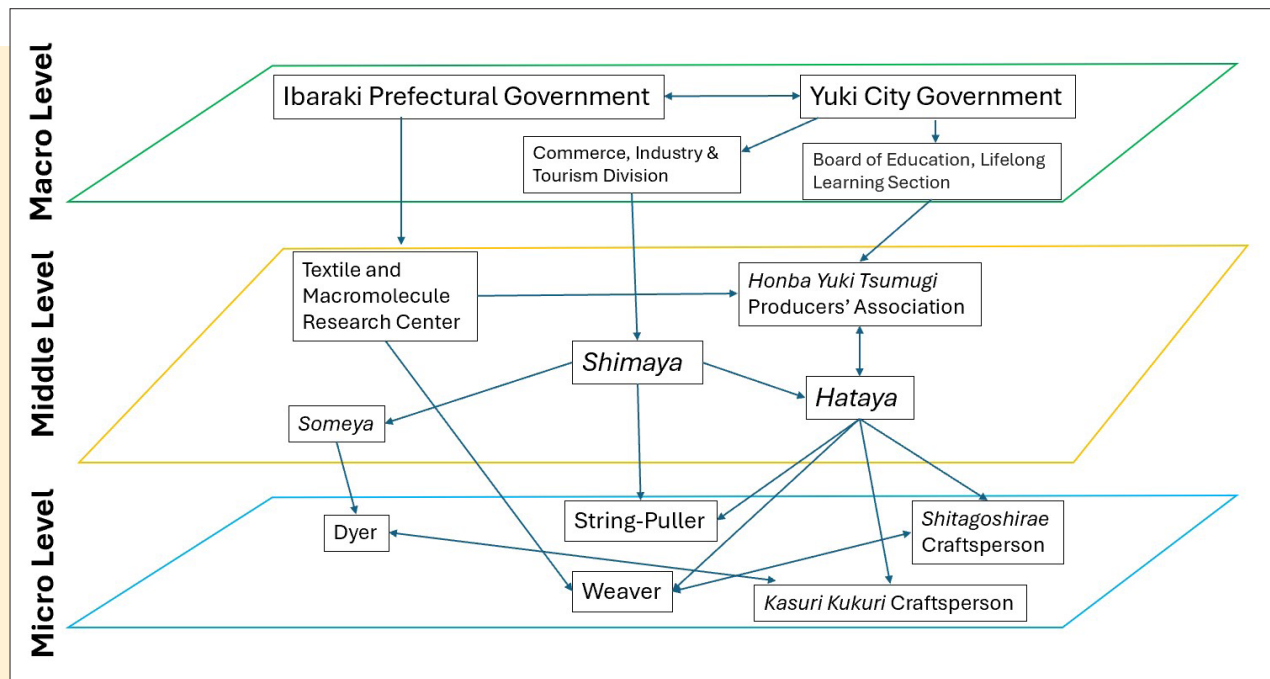


Figure 4
 Illustration of the Ibaraki prefecture *honba yuki tsumugi* production system. The lack of *shimaya* in the region puts production and education of *honba yuki tsumugi* at centre-stage, with *hataya* and technological support centres becoming more powerful actors.
 Source: Created by the author.

workshops, although these are often used as tourist experiences or as sources of additional income, rather than for formal capacity building. Currently, only six *honba yuki tsumugi shimaya* remain, all of which are located within Yuki City, Ibaraki prefecture.

Among the multiple key actors in Ibaraki's production system, *shimaya* take the central role. They oversee production, and control which *hataya* they take orders from (or not). Based on these orders, *hataya* determine how much manpower they need, which trickles down to the Research Center and the number of new craftspeople they can train and, in that sense, bring into the industry. As such, Ibaraki's production system is a commercial one, with the 'merchant' as the system's central actor.

Tochigi prefecture

The 'macro' layer actors in the Tochigi prefecture production system (see Figure 5) are the Tochigi prefectural government and the Oyama City government's *Honba Yuki Tsumugi Promotion Section*, both of which also largely focus on distributing funding and planning promotional events. Unlike that of Yuki City, the Oyama City government is much more directly involved in the safeguarding of *honba yuki tsumugi* through its hiring of three 'tsumugi artisans' as city employees. Along with organising events to promote *honba yuki tsumugi* in

Oyama City, these artisans are also tasked with learning the entire production process of *honba yuki tsumugi*. If all else fails and the current system of divided labour falls apart, these three figures will be able to carry on *honba yuki tsumugi's* traditional production techniques.

The Tochigi 'middle' layer has two educational sites, the Tochigi prefecture *Tsumugi Textile Technology Support Center* (hereafter 'the Support Center') and the Mulberry, Silkworm, Cocoon, *Mawatakake* and String-Pulling Village (hereafter 'the Village'). Tochigi prefecture's Support Center offers year-long weaving programmes similar to Ibaraki's, while the Village focuses purely on string-related techniques and the promotion of Oyama sericulture. Unlike Ibaraki's Research Center, these two only teach *honba yuki tsumugi's* traditional production forms (refusing mechanisation), and do not put any limit on student numbers. In this way, it can be said that while Ibaraki prefecture's focus is much more efficient and production-based, Tochigi prefecture prioritises cultural heritage 'ideals'.

As there are no *shimaya* in the prefecture, Tochigi *hataya* sell their *honba yuki tsumugi* to *shimaya* in Yuki City. More precisely, Tochigi prefecture *hataya* interviewed as part of this research revealed that they feel pressured to *only* sell their products to Yuki City *shimaya*, as using

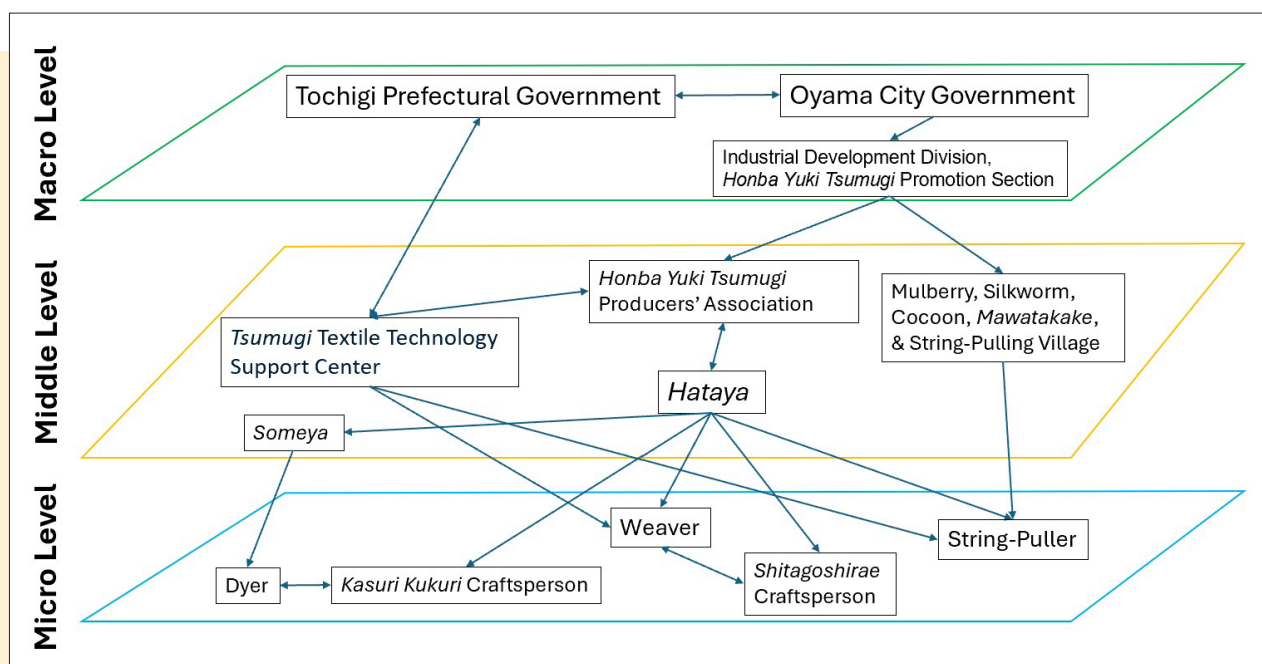


Figure 5
Illustration of the Tochigi prefecture *honba yuki tsumugi* production system.
Source: Created by the author.

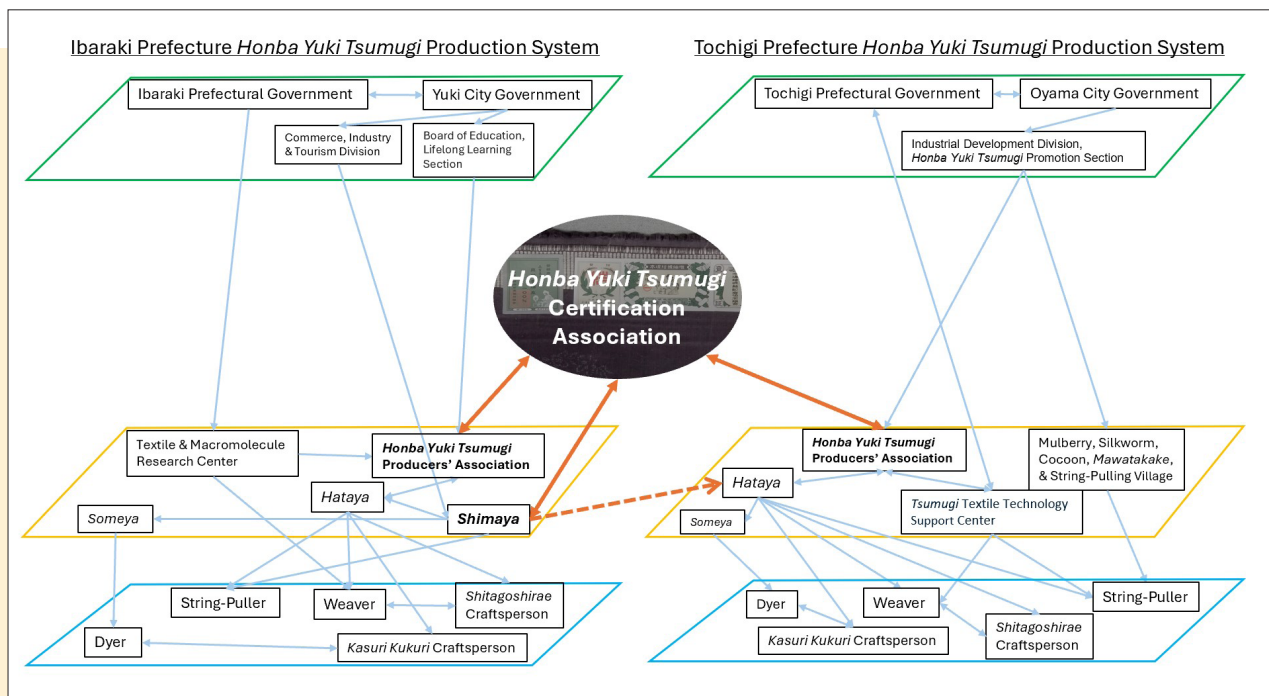


Figure 6
Layered visualisation of the entire *honba yuki tsumugi* production ecosystem.
Source: Created by the author.

any other sales outlets could risk their relationships with *shimaya*, who are their most stable 'customers'. If they are found to be taking direct orders, they would be considered 'two-timers' and might no longer receive orders from the *shimaya* they previously produced for. There is only one exception to this unspoken rule: a special programme by the Oyama City government that sponsors the sale of *honba yuki tsumugi* exclusively to Oyama City residents. This sale is carefully coordinated by the Tochigi prefecture *Honba Yuki Tsumugi Producers' Association* and the city government, the presence of the city government providing a special 'buffer' that protects *hataya* from risking their relationship with the *shimaya* of Yuki City.

The lack of *shimaya* in the region puts the production and education regarding *honba yuki tsumugi* at centre-stage, with *hataya* and technological support centres becoming more powerful actors.

Links between prefectural 'middle layers'

The 'middle layers' of both production systems as visualised in Figure 6 are crucial to the existence of *honba yuki tsumugi*. They represent *honba yuki tsumugi* education, production and sales, and are where safeguarding and capacity-building initiatives are organised.

Most importantly, this is where both prefectures are linked through the act of mutually supported cultural authorisation by the *Honba Yuki Tsumugi Certification Association*. The Certification Association inspects every bolt of *yuki tsumugi* fabric to determine and certify it as *honba* or not (as described in detail in Sakairi 1982). If a product does not pass this inspection, it cannot legally be sold under the name *honba yuki tsumugi*, and its monetary value drops sharply. As only the *honba* version of *yuki tsumugi* is designated and enlisted as heritage, the Certification Association also determines which *yuki tsumugi* is considered 'cultural heritage' (see Figure 7).



Figure 7
Certification seals of *honba yuki tsumugi*, on display at the Yuki City Tourism Product Center.
Source: Photo by the author.

Products are inspected to check string quality, whether strings used are hand-pulled or not, how many warp and weft strings are in every square inch, that the design is properly formed throughout the entire textile, and so on. However, not just any *tsumugi* can be submitted for inspection – the fabric must be produced by a *hataya* that is registered in one of the two prefectures' producer associations and be sold by a *shimaya* that is registered with the Ibaraki Merchants' Association. The existence of the Certification Association thus boosts the authority of Ibaraki prefecture's *shimaya* and the two prefectural producer associations, as only the *yuki tsumugi* that passes through them can eventually become a certified piece of cultural heritage.

Two approaches to safeguarding targeting 'micro-level' craftspeople

The difference in the stakeholders of the two prefectural middle layers, most centrally the existence (or not) of *shimaya*, is the essential cause for the difference in approaches to *honba yuki tsumugi* safeguarding adopted by the Ibaraki and Tochigi production systems.

Tochigi prefecture takes on the stance of preserving *honba yuki tsumugi* as cultural heritage. This, for one, is visible in its hiring of *tsumugi* artisans as city employees. In an interview held as part of this research, the chairman of the Tochigi prefecture *Honba Yuki Tsumugi Producers' Association* said, 'We've already preserved *honba yuki tsumugi* [here in Tochigi]. Even if all the *hataya* close, the "tsumugi artisans" will still preserve the techniques and be able to teach them to the next generation if necessary' (translation by author).

Being trained in all steps of the production process, the three *tsumugi* artisans are seen as living encyclopaedias and, in the worst case, as the only 'necessary' bearers of *honba yuki tsumugi*. This view of *honba yuki tsumugi* sees the craft as just a series of techniques and skills, ignoring the active roles of stakeholders, and disregarding potential evolution of the craft. Viewing the craft as just a collection of skills is similarly reflected in the prefecture's more-or-less unlimited training of craftspeople through free programmes without ensuring employment following completion of these programmes. A disregard for craft evolution is present in the prefectural stakeholders' resistance to accept any forms of *yuki tsumugi* other than *honba*, which assumes that *honba yuki tsumugi* is a static culture rather than a living heritage.

Ibaraki prefecture, on the other hand, takes the approach of safeguarding *honba yuki tsumugi* as a cultural industry. This approach is reflected in (but not limited to):

- the use of financial aid from the Ministry of Cultural Affairs for events focused on the sale of *yuki tsumugi* products
- the acceptance and promotion of cheaper and more efficient (mechanised) non-*honba* versions of *yuki tsumugi*, as well as the capacity building of non-*honba* production methods
- *shimaya* (economic centres) managing the only *honba yuki tsumugi* museums
- the industrial technology support centre's year-long *honba yuki tsumugi* weaving training course only accepting as many people as can then enter the industry as producers.

Here, *honba yuki tsumugi* is seen as a brand, whose cultural heritage designations help to sell the product. This approach is further made possible due to the overlapping of the name of *yuki tsumugi* with that of Yuki City and the concentration of *shimaya* in Yuki City. Although sales numbers are decreasing, competition and the push to survive as businesses drives change and evolution. As Komatsu (a pseudonym), co-owner of a Yuki City *shimaya*, said: 'I believe we need to protect *honba yuki tsumugi* in its original form, because there's nothing that compares to its quality. But simultaneously, we need to create a space that allows craftspeople to be more creative and to create new things – even new *tsumugi*' (interview with author; translated by author). An independent veteran weaver based in Ibaraki prefecture, Takahashi (a pseudonym), also stated that one needs to create products a customer wants, even if they are not necessarily *honba*, or else *yuki tsumugi* itself will disappear (interview with author). Though this approach is economically based, it allows *honba yuki tsumugi* to evolve and exist as a living heritage.

The hataya problem

As was briefly described earlier, *hataya* are weaving companies that are traditionally centred around a nuclear family, in the family home, with every member having their own role in the *honba yuki tsumugi*-making process. This is no longer necessarily the case, with the young generation now often leaving to pursue their own careers. All craftspeople interviewed throughout this research said that though they want to pass on the culture of *honba yuki tsumugi* to the next generation, the craft is too financially

unstable to be able to recommend to their children. Albeit with heavy hearts, most encourage their children to go on their own paths. Non-family members are hired as additional weavers, the numbers of which depend on the manpower needed. The leader of a *hataya* tends to be the patriarch of the family. This tradition developed because, typically, the women of the family performed the laborious and time-consuming tasks of string-pulling and weaving, while men had the time available to make deals with *shimaya*. Men of the family are also typically in charge of a crucial step in the production process called *shitagoshirae*, which is the preparation of a loom before weaving begins.

The family-centred aspect of *hataya* and the division of labour in *honba yuki tsumugi* has resulted in the mass closure of *hataya* in recent years. *Honba yuki tsumugi* being the product of divided labour, most craftspeople do not have the skills or knowledge associated with any of the production steps other than the one they are in charge of. Within *hataya*, weavers typically do not know how to do the briefly aforementioned *shitagoshirae*. However, weaving cannot begin until *shitagoshirae* is completed, so it is crucial that every *hataya* has at least one person with the skills to complete this important step. Being the person that prepares the looms, the person in charge of this step is also most aware of everyone's individual progress, necessary during interactions with *shimaya* and the creation of deadlines – which makes it almost 'natural' for the person in charge of *shitagoshirae* to be the *hataya* leader. Based on life expectancy statistics from the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare (2025), women in Japan live on average six years longer than men (87.13 years versus 81.09 years), which is relevant in the case of *hataya*, as this means the male leader, and the person in charge of *shitagoshirae*, is likely to pass away before other members of the *hataya*. This is an especially prevalent issue currently, as surveys taken of *honba yuki tsumugi* craftspeople show that the average age of those in charge of *shitagoshirae* is higher than that of other *honba yuki tsumugi* craftspeople (*Honba Yuki Tsumugi Certification Association* 2023). As shared by stakeholders in both Ibaraki and Tochigi, if there is no family member to step up and inherit leadership once a *hataya* leader passes away, the *hataya* often then just shuts down. Though the number of *hataya* has steadily decreased in recent years, the chairman of the Tochigi prefecture *Honba Yuki Tsumugi Producers' Association* claimed that none closed due to failed business or bankruptcy. Rather, they all closed because a single, key member passed away (interview

with author).

To attempt to resolve this, technology support centres in both Ibaraki and Tochigi prefectures have created *shitagoshirae* courses, which, so far, are mostly attended by amateur weavers looking to expand their skills. Though it is beneficial for an amateur craftsperson to pick up these skills, this has not remedied the situation as it does not account for the familial aspect of the *hataya*. The person doing *shitagoshirae* is, as mentioned, a leader of the family business and the face of the *hataya* during most business exchanges. While it is widely accepted to hire non-family members as weavers, bringing in someone external to take this leadership position, especially when the business is run out of a family's home, is seen as disrupting generations of the business's ownership. The skills related to *shitagoshirae* are important, and for the continuation of the production of *honba yuki tsumugi* it is necessary that these skills are taught to the new generation. However, apart from just the skills themselves, it is important that capacity-building efforts also consider the position a *shitagoshirae* craftsperson holds within the *hataya*, and the structure of relationships that make up a *hataya* as a whole.

At the point of *hataya* closure, the other family members and weavers are generally also at an age where they are beginning to consider retiring from *honba yuki tsumugi* production, so they take the closure as an opportunity to bring their weaving career to an end. However, this leaves amateur craftspeople with fewer options of where to go after learning the craft. Even if amateur craftspeople band together to form their own new *hataya*, they will not have the same generational ties to a *shimaya* that a longstanding *hataya* has. *Shimaya* are generally unwilling to take the financial risk of ordering from new and inexperienced *hataya*. Rather than taking a risk with a new *hataya*, it is more likely for a *shimaya* simply to increase their orders placed with one of the other *hataya* with whom they have a long-term relationship. Without a *shimaya* to sell their products, a new *hataya* will have no income and will quickly go out of business.

The safeguarding of relationships

An important theme that arose throughout the fieldwork for this research was the importance of relationships between stakeholders. In the past, *hataya* had the resources to be able to create their own *honba yuki tsumugi*, which they would then offer for sale to *shimaya*.

However, the possibility that they would be unable to sell their textile posed too high a financial risk for them to continue producing in this way. Therefore, *hataya* currently only produce based on orders made by *shimaya*. Though *shimaya* can technically place orders at any *hataya*, all the *shimaya* interviewed as part of this research confirmed that, over the years, everyone has developed their own domain of influence, or group of *hataya* with whom they (more-or-less exclusively) place orders. When placing an order, a *shimaya* considers which *hataya* in 'their group' is best at what, and they will not reach out to someone new unless they have no other choice. Even then, they would be very reluctant. One *shimaya* interviewed commented that if the string-pullers or *hataya* they work with stop producing, they will simply shut down their *shimaya*.

From the viewpoint of a *hataya*, even if they have been within the 'group' of a *shimaya* for many years (or even generations), they will not want to risk ruining their relationship (by accepting personal orders, by not meeting deadlines, etc.) with that *shimaya*, because that could lead to a decrease in or even a complete cessation of orders. This is especially the case for Tochigi prefecture *hataya*, who already face the disadvantage of all the *shimaya* they sell to being in Yuki City (i.e. the 'other' production system). If the longstanding relationships they have with a Yuki City *shimaya* fall apart, they would likely be left without orders and go out of business. The only exception to this is when the Oyama City government steps in as a buffer – customers purchasing kimono through the Oyama City kimono sponsorship programme can order directly from a *hataya* without going through a *shimaya*. Since sponsored kimono do not go through a *shimaya*, they cannot be certified as *honba yuki tsumugi*, but the municipal government vouching for the kimono serves as a quasi-certification for customers.

Hataya are composed of leader–employee and family relationships that exist in relation to *shimaya*. The relationships described above are an important part of the craft's history and culture, which are preserved through everyday business interactions between stakeholders. However, as *hataya* continue to close, if relationships are just 'preserved' in the same form they always have been, the *honba yuki tsumugi* production environment will only continue to shrink and become more exclusive. This shrinking and exclusivity make it very difficult for new craftspeople to enter the production ecosystem, undermining the effectiveness and, even, the purpose of

the capacity building of craft techniques. Thus, in the same way that craft techniques are safeguarded through capacity building, the relationships that make up the production environment need to undergo capacity building as well.

Discussion: safeguarding of living heritage through the safeguarding of production ecosystems

As has been described, two separate production systems exist simultaneously within the *honba yuki tsumugi* industry: one system approaches the safeguarding of *honba yuki tsumugi* as the safeguarding of a cultural industry, while the other approaches it as the preservation of a cultural heritage. There is no 'right' or 'wrong' approach. 'It doesn't matter what people are doing; what matters is that they are doing what they can to protect *honba yuki tsumugi*' (interview by author with *shimaya* co-owner Komatsu; translation by author). The cultural heritage approach, taken by Tochigi prefecture, rejects evolutions in craft methods and attempts to preserve *honba yuki tsumugi* in as close to its original form as possible, which is important for the sake of 'heritage' and 'historic' value. Tochigi prefecture's capacity-building programmes, being free, numerous and flexible in attendance, also make the craft more widely accessible for those who are interested in learning. However, for *honba yuki tsumugi* to be a living heritage, the cultural industry approach taken by Ibaraki prefecture that allows for change is also crucial. Though the bureaucratic and financial separation between the two production systems caused by the prefectural border between Ibaraki and Tochigi has caused difficulties thus far, coordination between the two sides and their approaches could lead to a more efficient distribution of resources and more effective safeguarding of *honba yuki tsumugi*.

At the present moment, both the 'cultural heritage' and 'cultural industry' approaches attempt capacity building solely at the individual level, which is not enough to properly safeguard *honba yuki tsumugi*. Though individual capacity building can boost craftspeople numbers, it is crucial that capacity-building initiatives shift to consider the creation of a stable environment for amateur craftspeople to enter after they complete their training. This capacity building needs not only to involve skill-building (e.g. the training of *shitagoshirae*), but the building of relationships at a more 'ecosystemic' scale. Relationships need to be built between both prefectural systems, between the 'layers' of the production ecosystem portrayed in this paper, and

between stakeholders coexisting in the same 'layer'. Some examples of this include relationships between amateur craftspeople and *shimaya*, to create trust that could enable amateur craftspeople to start their own *hataya*, as well as deeper relationships between *shimaya* and cooperatives to allow for more flexibility in the routes of *honba yuki tsumugi* distribution and sale.

Another important shift would be from the capacity building of individuals to that of organisations (namely, *hataya*). Rather than just training amateur weavers how to do *shitagoshirae*, it would be beneficial also to train core *hataya* members in business skills, so that they can take on managerial positions within the *hataya*. In this way, even if an 'outsider' employee weaver handles *shitagoshirae*, overall *hataya* management is kept within the *hataya* family. Part of the financial aid the production region receives for capacity building can also be shifted into incentivising *hataya* in order to continue operations and hire amateur weavers.

Teaching techniques related to production is no longer enough as a capacity-building measure for the safeguarding of *honba yuki tsumugi*. It is necessary to step back from craftspeople (here referred to as the 'micro' level), where capacity-building efforts have so far focused, and to look at the 'middle' and 'macro' levels of both prefectural *honba yuki tsumugi* production systems. This means understanding what each actor needs, especially in relation to the entirety of the ecosystem, and considering the significance of the connections between them. By understanding industry actors as one part of an interconnected *honba yuki tsumugi* production ecosystem, it is possible to better understand the specific needs of the entire region, and to develop more effective capacity-building efforts. Stakeholder relationships, communications and interactions are a fluctuating series of negotiations that contributes to *honba yuki tsumugi* being a living culture – and an ecosystemic and more flexible view of capacity building can contribute to the safeguarding of *honba yuki tsumugi* as a living heritage.

Conclusion

In an interview held as part of this research with *shimaya* owner Kuwanuma (a pseudonym), it was apparent that the method he employed to safeguard *honba yuki tsumugi* differed significantly from others' methods. From the beginning of our interview, he emphasised: '[My company]

works as a *shimaya*, but that's just one of the things it does. I think it's more correct to say we're a "maker"' (translation by author). Kuwanuma used the term 'maker' to refer to his company to underline that even though his company sells *honba yuki tsumugi* like other *shimaya* do, he also hires staff involved in the textile's actual production. With over 50 staff, his is undoubtedly the biggest, wealthiest and most influential *shimaya* in the area. He said:

In order to preserve *honba yuki tsumugi*, you need to create an environment where it can be preserved, and that's what I'm trying to do ... I haven't completed [creating] this environment yet, but I want to hire all the craftspeople needed and produce *honba yuki tsumugi* here. If the environment doesn't exist, I will create it myself. If necessary, the staff I hire will also train the next generation of producers. (Translation by the author)

Taking everything into his own hands, Kuwanuma expressed the need for a total craft environment where all craftspeople could work. In this way, his company would cover all bases of an industry otherwise based on divided labour, becoming an *itoya*, *hataya* and *shimaya* all in one. He is the only 'maker' that can even begin to consider such a grandiose plan, as he is the only one with the necessary financial stability, land and network. However, if the protection of the craft is minimised to only that which takes places within the bounds of a *shimaya*, the networks, relationships and evolution that make up the *honba yuki tsumugi* cultural industry will likely reach a stalemate – making it less a 'living heritage' than the historical product of a single company.

Key here is the beginning of Kuwanuma's quote: 'In order to preserve *honba yuki tsumugi*, you need to create an environment where it can be preserved.' While the capacity building of craft skills is necessary, this does not actually safeguard the craft or its industry. Intangible cultural heritage is something that needs to be continuously lived and practised. Techniques must be taught to new bearers, but unless they are practised, they will soon be forgotten. Thus, it is necessary for the wider industry and context within which the intangible heritage is practised to also be safeguarded. In the case of *honba yuki tsumugi*, there are plentiful skill-based capacity-building programmes in both prefectural systems, but what is lacking is a stable environment (regardless of the prefectural border) for amateur craftspeople to use the skills they learn after

they complete these programmes. This calls for looking past the production's 'micro' level and expanding to an ecosystemic view of the *honba yuki tsumugi* production region that understands how craft skills and craftspeople exist in a living network of stakeholder relations. For the craft to be safeguarded as a living heritage, the craft production ecosystem in its entirety needs to be understood and safeguarded and made into a stable environment for future generations of craftspeople, and one important thing to consider in order to achieve this is the capacity building of these stakeholder relationships.

This paper has provided a limited view of the *yuki tsumugi* ecosystem, in that it discussed only actors within the *yuki tsumugi* production region. For the craft's future, it is likely it will become necessary to create links with other craft-producing regions, non-*yuki tsumugi*-related industries and organisations, and even international actors. The beginnings of such attempts were mentioned throughout the fieldwork of this paper, but they were all still in their brainstorming phases. The next step for this research would be to expand from the *yuki tsumugi* production ecosystem and to explore how this ecosystem interacts with other production regions and actors. (One example of an important set of actors to be explored is customers, who are likely to come from outside the production region.) Additionally, this exploration of the *yuki tsumugi* ecosystem did not involve natural actors (e.g. mulberry farmers, silkworms, etc.). Thus, another potential source of development for this research would be to add an environmental (in the biological sense) level into the understanding of the *yuki tsumugi* craft production ecosystem. A biological perspective would expand the ecosystem both chronologically, involving the time it takes for raw materials to be prepared, and geographically, as raw materials may be sourced from other prefectures (or,

in the case of other craft industries, from other countries).

Viewing the *honba yuki tsumugi* industry and production region through the lens of capacity building has shown that when developing capacity building or safeguarding initiatives, intangible cultural heritage needs to be approached as an integrated ecosystem, not just as a collection of separate stakeholders. The entire *honba yuki tsumugi* production ecosystem would include the production systems of both Ibaraki and Tochigi prefectures, as well as the network of relationships and interactions between both systems' layers and stakeholders. Both prefectures tackle the issue of heritage safeguarding very differently, one focusing on the preservation of culture, and the other taking the stance of an industry in need of development. Yet, regardless of the differences in their points of view and the separation between their systems, both prefectures' capacity-building efforts ultimately focus only on the 'micro level' of stakeholders through the training of individuals. The long history of *honba yuki tsumugi* being a product of divided labour has formed time-honoured relationships, which are respected and continue to exist even as stakeholders pass away or close their businesses. This is a precious part of the craft's heritage; unfortunately, however, it results in the gradual shrinking of the production region, leaving no room for amateur craftspeople to enter. Capacity building must expand to also include the fostering of communication and relationships based on an understanding of these 'traditional' or generational stakeholder relationships and, ideally, collaborations that connect the two prefectural approaches to *honba yuki tsumugi* in a flexible way. Apart from the transmission of craft techniques, understanding and strengthening the entire production ecosystem is crucial for *honba yuki tsumugi*'s safeguarding as a living cultural heritage. 🍡

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