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**Special Case Study Report: Japan**  
Safeguarding Tangible Culture in Intangible Cultural Heritage  
—Kyoto Gion Festival Yamahoko Events as an Example—

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**Introduction**

Today, as a country report to trainees and citizens, I would like to talk about Japan’s administrative efforts for the protection of tangible culture in order to preserve and maintain our intangible cultural heritage.

Since our intangible cultural heritage emerges within the daily life of people, safeguarding our heritage involves working directly on the techniques or customs inherited by people and society. On the other hand, intangible cultural heritage is not comprised only of itself. For example, music or industrial arts require a variety of tools, such as musical instruments to produce sounds or tools to curve, cut, or snip. Safeguarding such goods, that is, tangible cultural properties, therefore, contributes significantly to the preservation of our intangible cultural heritage.

Safeguarding tangible culture related to the Gion Festival Yamahoko Events with the Gion Festival Yamahoko Events as an example, I would like to report on the activities that protected the tangible culture, which lead to the preservation of our intangible cultural heritage.

Currently, there are 32 *Yamahokos* (floats). Among these, 29 *Yamahokos* are designated by the national government as important tangible folk cultural properties. Regarding the *Toro Yama* and the *Ayakasa Hoko*, two of the remaining three floats currently used in the Yamahoko procession, and the *Ofune Hoko* and the *Taka Yama* that are not currently used, the heritage pieces created during the Edo period for the procession are designated by Kyoto City as tangible folk cultural properties. Thus, the Yamahoko Events are designated as both tangible (cultural properties) and intangible cultural properties.

*Yamahoko* and *Yatai* (bases of floats) used in Japanese festivals, as represented by the *Yamahoko* of the Gion Festival, are a collection of the quintessence of folk techniques and arts of different ages, such as the arts of dyeing, metalwork, woodcarving, lacquer work, painting, and woodwork. It can be said, therefore, that they represent the composite art of the people. In particular, since Kyoto had been an industrial city representing Japan until the Edo period, the city seemed to have served also as a billboard of what we currently call a traditional industry or cutting-edge technologies of the times, such as textiles, metalworking, and woodworking. This is why a *Yamahoko* of the Gion Festival is commonly called a “Mobile Museum.”

**Gion Festival Protection Project**

Measures to protect tangible culture can be divided into the following three categories: the *Yamahoko* repair projects (government supported projects); the new creation

projects; and the small repair projects (unofficial, shortened names are used here since their official names are too long).

1. The Yamahoko repair project is a mission critical subsidy programme supported by the government. The goal is to preserve the original forms and decorations of Yamahokos centering on those created before the Edo period by repairing or reproducing the original. For cloth products, for example, not only the raw materials, but also the lost techniques associated with them are recovered by close examinations of the original. The annual budget for this project is 45 million yen, half of which is provided by the national government and the remaining half is shared by Kyoto Prefecture, Kyoto City, and local preservation associations. Under this project, three to five programmes are implemented concurrently each year.

2. The new creation project is a system to provide financial assistance specifically to newly designed and produced cloth decorations. The reasons why the assistance under this project is limited to cloth decorations are as follows: Since Yamahoko towns, which share in the benefits of Nishijin, a famous high quality silk fabric production district, and hold Yamahokos, had long constituted one of the best textile wholesale districts in Japan, they have connoisseurs of furnishings, including cloth products, as bearers of the Gion Festival; and the historical background of Yamahoko that while Yamahoko used to be an elegant attraction of a festival designed to dazzle people, the feature of elegance gradually set in after the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and the skills of creating a beautiful appearance by changing decorative dyed products have become the target of competition.

It can be said, therefore, that the new creation project is a subsidy programme that reflects the historical uniqueness of this event, which is, it gives life to and maintains skills of creating the beautiful appearance or the spirit of elegance by changing the dyed products. For example, the design of this hanging blanket (Dokake) of Hosho Yama was created by Maruyama Okyo, a famous painter in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. For another hanging blanket here, which is being produced now, the original drawing was created by Ikuo Hirayama, one of the most famous painters in present-day Japan.

From the perspective of the protection of cultural properties, this subsidy programme assumes great significance. Because while ordinary subsidy programmes provide assistance to repairing objects, that is, the cultural properties themselves, this project provides financial assistance to the creation of new tangible culture to maintain the historical uniqueness of the festival.

The annual budget for this project, which has been conducted since 1982, is 37.50 million yen, which is shared by Kyoto Prefecture (2/5), Kyoto City (1/5), and local preservation associations (1/5). Under this project, five to six programmes are concurrently conducted each year.

3. The small repair project provides financial assistance for urgent repairs. Since a Hoko weighs around 10 tons, it often needs repairs after one procession where it is pulled many kilometers. Such damage must be taken care of as soon as possible to be ready for the next year. Moreover, it is more economical in the end to make repairs promptly before the damage gets worse.

Although the budget for this project varies each year, it is 12 million yen on the average,

which is borne by Kyoto Prefecture (1/3), external bodies of Kyoto City (1/3), and local preservation associations (1/3). Under this project, eight to 12 or 13 programmes are carried out each year.

These are the tangible culture protection activities that are conducted to maintain our intangible cultural heritage of the Gion Festival Yamahoko Events. As stated previously, the implementation of these activities is possible since most of the Yamahokos of the Gion Festival are designated tangible cultural properties. Ongoing efforts are made to ensure better repair practices and not to leave all the repairs and restoration work to vendors, such as the establishment of an advisory committee comprising experts and the implementation of repairs under the supervision of experts.

These are the subsidies for tangible culture of the Gion Festival. Such subsidies for the Gion Festival have roots in the independent subsidy system of Kyoto City, which was established in 1923, way before the enactment of the Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties and the Asia-Pacific War. It was at this time when towns in charge of Yamahokos came together to establish the Federation of the Gion Festival Yamahoko Associations (Rengokai).

Meanwhile, the Association for Creation and Repair Experts of the Festival Yatai was established recently to ensure the successful succession of professional techniques related to the repair and restoration of decorations for traditional festivals. The Association was certified by the national government as a body with selected preservation techniques for the protection of cultural properties. As mentioned in the beginning, since Yamahoko and Yatai represent the composite art of people comprising diverse industrial arts, the members of the Repair Experts Association are also diverse in their expertise. The national government provides subsidies for the succession of such traditional techniques.