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Reflections on the Traditional Performing Arts

Project: Documenting Osaka's Intangible

Cultural Heritage under COVID-19

(ONLINE)

This presentation analyzes the three-year project, "Traditional performing arts coordinator development," funded by the Agency for Cultural Affairs and implemented by Soai University, which aimed to develop human resources for management in traditional performing arts. The program focused on genres with historical ties to Osaka, including Gagaku (2019), Noh (2020), and Ningyo Joruri Bunraku (2021).

The findings show some structural issues with the background of the project. First, the music curriculum in Japanese schools is based mainly on Western music, and there is a lack of traditional performing arts teachers that inspire children's interest and enjoyment. Second, the educational succession system of traditional performing arts differs from genre to genre, which reflects the historical development and characteristics of supporters. Gagaku (Japanese court music) has been developed as a Buddhist ritual music and dance since the 6th century, and the Imperial Household Agency has been involved in its succession since the 19th century. Noh, established in the Muromachi period, was supported by the Shogunate as ceremonial music during the Edo period. However, today, five schools are active in the private sector. Bunraku flourished in Osaka in the early modern period, supported by townspeople; however, its patrons have dwindled and are now under the national training system. There is an urgent need to develop not only experts in each genre but also coordinators who can engage in dialogue with collaboration across genres to propose necessary measures to society. Due to the impact of the coronavirus infection, from 2020, the program was distributed online, which included a series of lectures, symposia, and concerts with the cooperation of performers, experts, researchers, and related organizations (especially the Gagaku organization Garyo-Kai, Yamamoto Noh Theatre, and Bunraku-za). This presentation discusses two perspectives based on the various insights and findings gained from the three-year project.

1. Issues in distributing audio-visual materials

The spread of the COVID-19 virus has led to a surge in online distribution of stage performances, which can easily be accessed from home. Many traditional performing arts groups have used their own YouTube channels for promotion, documentation, and practice. However, we also need to recognize that some performances are recorded in special environments that are different from the original format. For example, Shoryo-e (held annually on April 22) was recorded in April 2021 in Shitennoji, not on a historical outdoor stone stage (Ishi-butai) but in the Gochiko-in room. The number of performers and dancers was strictly controlled to maintain distance. Although the performance lasted more than four hours, it was "different from the original form" according to Shitennoji.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, small-scale performances of Bunraku had sometimes been performed in places other than the original Bunraku theatres. These places lacked the stage equipment necessary for Bunraku, such as funazoko (a device for hiding the legs of the puppets and puppeteers). However, due to budget constraints by the organizers, performances were sometimes held without these devices, resulting in their legs being exposed. The audience needs to know that it is different from the original form, although it is interesting to see the entire movement of the puppeteers.

Further, it is becoming more difficult for people to see the traditional performing arts in their original form because of budgetary and other constraints. However, we can use technology to make the activities and existence known; as well as to be as diverse as possible to convey the context therein. This requires a balance between preservation and promotion, and a long-term cycle perspective.

2. Perspectives on people's "memories" associated with traditional performing arts

We received great responses from students as well as talks by performers, lectures, symposia by researchers, and stage productions throughout the three years of the project. However, it is difficult to link them to practical activities. Although men are the overwhelmingly dominant professional performers in traditional performing arts (Bunraku being particularly prominent), there is virtually no advocacy for changing this structure. However, many women engage in performing arts in local folklore, including those who receive training from the experts. Recording only "professional performances" does not provide a complete picture of the traditional performing arts.

Furthermore, a large number of women were active in the fields of production and manufacturing that support traditional performing arts, and most of the students in the project (over 95%) were women. This is despite the fact that the gender ratios in Japan are almost equal. This perspective has not been particularly discussed in the conservative world of the traditional performing arts.

There is still a serious shortage of supporters and coordinators of the traditional performing arts. Local governments and society need to recognize that traditional performing arts are a unique heritage of the region, and that they can help our children reaffirm their identity and serve as an axis for thinking about the connection between the local climate, art, and society.



Bio: Seiko Shimura received a B.A. in musicology from Tokyo University of the Arts in 1999 and a PhD in design from Kyushu University in 2014, then served as a post-doctoral fellow at Graduate School of Kyushu University until 2015, followed as a research associate at Cultural Policy Program of National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies, Tokyo until 2017. Her doctoral dissertation was published by Kyushu University Press in 2017 as "Theory of Performing Arts Management-Aiming at Co-creation with Audience". She is currently working as an associate professor at Soai University. Her current research projects include traditional performing arts conservation and promotion, and arts management education. In recent years, she serves as a member of the expert committee at the Osaka Arts Council, a board member of Japan Arts Management Association, and a member of the executive committee of Fukuoka Early Music Festival. Since 2019, she has been the director of the Traditional Performing Arts Coordinator Development Program subsidised by the Agency for Cultural Affairs.