

Taiwan Yuan-Li Handiwork Association —The Beauty of Small or the Fullness of Big?

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“Rush-grass is something that no one used to inquire into. Thus, the research we do and what we define now are our call. Therefore, I always say that the Taiwan Yuan-Li Handwork Association is creating and defining the history of rush-grass craft, which is the one thing no other place in the world has.”

Taiwan Yuan-Li Handwork Association, president Wen-Hui Yeh

October 2015, on the scene of the ninth Love Rush-Grass Craft Awards held by the Taiwan Yuan-Li Handwork Association, president Wen-Hui Yeh felt very emotional at the sight of the exhibitions and award winners. Should the association take orders recently placed by MUJI Japan (the Ryohin Keikaku Co., Ltd.), an retail company dedicated to sustainable living and selling “no-brand” household and consumer goods worldwide? Moreover, should the association’s future development focus on the comprehensive cultural and creative industry that combines eco-development of rush grass, rush-weaving inheritance, product design, and marketing, or should it retain its original intention, cultural preservation focused on propagating rush-weaving skills and product design? President Yeh ponders these thoughts.

The Taiwan Yuan-Li Handiwork Association emerged from the San-Jiao Community Development Association. Since 2003, president Yeh has worked to recover the disappearing rush-weaving craft, which has a history of almost 300 years. In this effort, more than ten women with rush-weaving skills have been located and their old memories stirred. When the association was first founded, its main tasks were to preserve rush-weaving skills and culture. Thus, it grew from pure community development into a social enterprise with multiple core values, including not only cultural preservation, but industrial development and social justice.

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1. General Situation of the Rush-Grass Industry in Taiwan

There are many kinds of rush-grass (usually indicating bulrush), and in Taiwan, it was first used to weave grass mats, in fact, since 1727. In 1765, a woman named Cha-Lu-Cha-Man, who lived in Tannatanangh, developed grass mats into more delicate, beautiful, and practical items. Simultaneously, wild rush-grass was transplanted into paddy fields to ensure a supply source (International Culture and Tourism Bureau of Miaoli County 2015). Besides that, in 1897, Hung Yuan, a woman who lived in Yuan-li, created the first rush-grass hat in Taiwan. With changing times, improved technology, trends, and consumption habits, vendors started to research, develop, and introduce many other materials. For example, development of the P.P Sanada hat, knitted hats, balaclavas, machine hats, sandals, cloth-hat industries, and footwear manufacturers have created massive foreign exchange earnings for Taiwan and gained the whole world's attention (Chang 2002).

With rush-grass growing plentifully in wet-lands by the Da-an River's low course, the handmade grass-hat industry became very popular for a time, especially Yuan-li rush-grass and Da-jia grass hats, renowned local specialties of middle Taiwan. With its favorable geographical position, Da-jia was the land transportation and ocean cargo entry and exit point for both imported and exported merchandise and household supplies. Thus, Da-jia became the grass-hat distribution center, and this is why grass hats are called "*Da-jia grass hats*" (Chen 2009). The very first grass hat in Taiwan appeared in 1897, and then in 1901, people in Da-jia exported them to Japan. In 1903, they were exported to Europe and America. These grass hats' quality was so high that in 1936, 16 million were sold in the export trade. Grass hats became Taiwan's third largest star industry, following rice and sugar. A new breakthrough was made after World War II. Numerous grass hats were exported to Japan and China. However, with termination of any relationship with Japan and the rise of the global petrochemical industry, plastic replaced rush-grass, and rush-grass crafts declined.

1.1 Ingredients' Planting and Harvesting

Rush-grass, or *Cyperus monophyllus Vahl* ("*hsi tsao*" in Taiwanese), is Cyperus. Its growth is closely related to soil and climate. At the middle and lower reaches of the Yangtze River, the climate is warm and rainy—great for the growth of rush-grass. There, rush-grass grows slim and long, and its texture is hard and tough, making it an excellent weaving material. The stem of triangle rush-grass in Yuan-li has a one-of-a-kind triangular cross-section. Its growth range is from 24° 19' N to 24° 32' N and 120° 33' E to 120° 43' E; only within that limited range of less than 10 km can rush-grass with the triangular cross-section grow. Rush-grass growing at the Da-an River's mouth is insect resistant due to its dense clusters; it needs no pesticides. Rush-grass is an environmentally friendly plant in line with the values of green economy.

Rush-grass is planted in the same way as paddy rice and is also transplanted like rice seedlings in paddy fields. Rush-grass is harvested at three different stages of growth, according to the need for different attributes and prices. Rush-grass harvested in autumn has the best quality and flexibility, and it is suitable for weaving high-class products. Thus it brings a higher price. Rush-grass harvested in winter has shorter, slimmer stems suitable for weaving mats and small artwork. In spring, the grasses are wide, long, and easy to snap; these are used for rough products with poorer quality, and they are fairly cheap.

1.2 Product Category and Manufacturing Process

The earliest rush-weaving products were “practical” daily essentials, that is, traditionally speaking, grass mats and grass hats. With development of material properties and innovative techniques, a variety of products have now been developed.

For example, each step of the manufacturing process of rush-grass product—from planting, harvesting, and solarizing by upstream farmers to tying in bundles, stripping, hammering, kneading, and spraying the grass, then weaving into products—is mostly achieved by an individual (Figure 1). Completed products are mainly customized by hat and mat retailers and sold through traditional social relations. The entire production and sales network is formed by rush-grass farmers, buyers, weaving craftswomen and craftsmen, sellers, processors, and retailers.

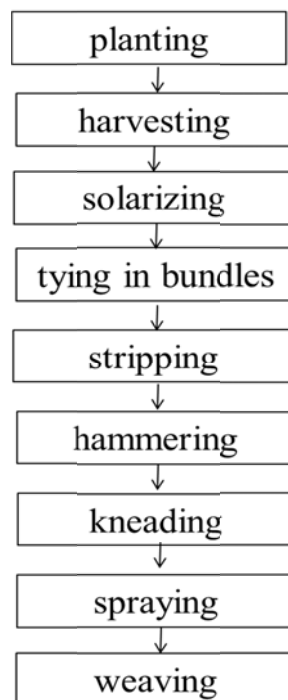


Figure 1 The Manufacturing Process of Rush-Grass Product