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Cultural Resilience and the Protection Mechanism of Intangible Cultural Heritage: Taking the Wajima Lacquer Art after the Noto Earthquake as an Example

Yuze Li

Tianjin Academy of Fine Arts, Tianjin, 300141, China

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Abstract: The 2024 Noto Peninsula earthquake and the subsequent heavy rainfall in Okunoto caused severe damage to Wajima lacquerware production, disrupting workshops, material supplies, apprenticeship systems, and the everyday social networks that sustain traditional craft practice. Based on field interviews and documentary sources, this study examines how the disaster affected the cultural production chain of lacquerware and analyzes the multi-layered response involving governmental agencies, cultural institutions, and civil society groups. The findings indicate that post-disaster recovery of intangible cultural heritage extends beyond physical reconstruction and requires the restoration of the relational ecology among artisans, place, and craft techniques. The case of Wajima demonstrates that cultural resilience is not an inherent attribute, but a dynamic process continually shaped through institutional support, community participation, and craft practitioners' self-organization. This study offers an analytical perspective for understanding how intangible cultural heritage adapts to disaster contexts and how cultural ecosystems can rebuild continuity through social collaboration.

1. Introduction

In recent years, as climate anomalies and natural disasters like earthquakes become increasingly frequent, the preservation of cultural heritage faces growing complexity and challenges. Unlike tangible heritage that can be physically restored through restoration, intangible cultural heritage is more vulnerable due to its dependence on inheritors, workshops, and local ecological contexts. When struck by natural disasters, such heritage often suffers not only physical damage but may also lead to the loss of traditional skills and social memory. How to swiftly restore the production chain and cultural ecosystem of intangible heritage after disasters has become a central issue in contemporary cultural policy and heritage studies.

Japan has developed a mature cultural heritage emergency response mechanism through prolonged disaster exposure. Its institutional and social coordination model, though widely studied, presents both valuable lessons and inherent limitations. The 2024 Noto Peninsula earthquake and autumn's Okinoto heavy rains severely impacted the Nada region, renowned for its lacquer artistry. This crisis has made the reconstruction of Nada lacquer art a pivotal case study for examining the relationship

between "disasters and cultural resilience."

2. History and Cultural Value of Wajima Lacquer Art

As a representative of Japanese lacquer art, Wajima lacquer craftsmanship traces its origins to the Muromachi period. Research indicates that the earliest surviving Wajima lacquerware is the vermilion lacquer door of the former main hall at Shigemori Shrine in Ishikawa Prefecture, dating back to 1524 [1]. From the Edo period onward, Wajima gradually developed a highly specialized and systematically organized lacquer production system. In 1975, it was officially designated as a "National Traditional Craft" by the Japanese government [2]. This recognition not only solidified its position within Japan's traditional craft heritage but also established " Wajima " as a symbolic brand of Japanese lacquer culture.

When discussing Japanese lacquer art, the name Wajima immediately comes to mind. As both a cultural emblem of Ishikawa Prefecture and the Hokuriku region, it stands as one of the most globally recognized symbols of this craft. The brand value of Wajima stems not only from its centuries-old artisanal heritage but also from institutional safeguards, educational programs, and widespread social recognition.

As a cornerstone of institutional and educational support, the Ishikawa Prefectural Wajima Shikken(Wajima Institute of Lacquer Art), established in 1982, has been dedicated to cultivating professional talent. The institute offers both general and specialized training programs, providing students with multidisciplinary instruction in techniques such as Chinkin, Makie (Japanese lacquer painting), and lacquer coating over 2-3 year cycles. To lower the learning barrier and encourage young people to engage with traditional crafts, the institute implements a tuition-free policy, with textbook and material costs covered by the institution [3]. Additionally, the institute regularly invites "Important Intangible Cultural Properties Holders" (known as "Ningen Kokuho") to teach, helping students bridge traditional and contemporary craftsmanship. This policy reflects the shared responsibility between the Japanese government and local authorities in cultural preservation, while also highlighting lacquer art's strategic role in shaping regional economies and cultural identities.

Meanwhile, the Wajima Museum of Urushi Art, established in 1980 as Japan's first lacquer art museum, has evolved beyond its original role of mere collection and exhibition. It now serves as a vital hub connecting craft preservation, cultural education, and societal outreach. The museum's collection has grown from approximately 300 pieces at its opening to over 1,400 [4]. Exhibitions showcase not only "National Treasures" and masterpieces by local artisans but also outstanding works by graduates from training institutes across Japan. This continuous exposure to lacquer artists' creations has attracted domestic and international visitors and study groups, forming a tripartite system of "craft-education-industry" for preservation and dissemination.

This demonstrates that the development of Wajima lacquer art not only relies on its traditional craftsmanship but also exemplifies Japan's exemplary approach to integrating institutionalization with industrialization in intangible cultural heritage protection. It showcases not merely the outcomes of cultural policies aimed at "preserving traditions," but also serves as a vivid case study of how traditional skills sustain their vitality through education, exhibitions, tourism, and social capital.

However, as the Wajima lacquer art holds a central position in the local economy and cultural identity, any natural disaster not only causes economic losses but also tests the implementation of national cultural policies and the resilience of intangible cultural heritage. UNESCO's "Guidelines on Risk Management of Cultural Heritage" emphasizes that disasters affect cultural heritage in an "irreversible" and "multilayered" manner, impacting not only physical spaces but also skill transmission and community structures (UNESCO, 2010). Thus, the 2024 Noto earthquake and the subsequent Okunoto torrential rains provide a prime case study for examining "the vulnerability and

resilience of intangible cultural heritage in disaster contexts."

3. Impact of Disaster: From Material Fracture to Cultural Disorder

The M7.6 earthquake that struck the Noto Peninsula on January 1, 2024, caused catastrophic damage to Wajima City in Ishikawa Prefecture. According to data from the Ishikawa Prefectural Office of Cultural Properties, over 2,000 traditional craft facilities in the city sustained varying degrees of damage, with some historic districts completely leveled. The power grid, water supply, and transportation systems were all paralyzed (Ishikawa Prefectural Office of Cultural Properties, 2024). Before reconstruction could even begin, torrential rains in the Okunoto region on September 21 of the same year triggered mudslides and floods, dealing another blow to the already fragile infrastructure.

After the earthquake, Wajima was temporarily cut off. The main road to the city center was severed by surface fractures and collapsed bridges, preventing heavy vehicles from entering and complicating the delivery of relief supplies. During my field visit in July 2025, I found that while the primary highway to Wajima had just reopened, it still showed visible potholes and uneven surfaces (Figure 1), with construction crews working continuously along the route. This vividly illustrates the arduous and slow recovery of post-disaster infrastructure. Within a month of the quake, Wajima experienced complete water and power outages, along with severed communications. During the harsh winter temperatures, many residents and artisans were forced to relocate to prefabricated housing or shelters. The temporary accommodations lacked internet access, and locals recalled having to walk to convenience stores at night to stay connected. This enforced isolation prompted many craftsmen to consider leaving Wajima to rebuild their lives. Some larger workshops chose to relocate to Kanazawa or other areas to resume production quickly and avoid losing orders.

Figure 1: Post-disaster photo taken in wajima on January 24, 2024

However, the post-disaster Wajima was far from silent. Lacquer artists and enthusiasts from across the region spontaneously formed volunteer convoys to transport supplies around damaged roads.

Local lacquer artisans demonstrated remarkable resilience in adversity-while proactively checking on fellow craftsmen's safety, they prioritized less affected communities over volunteers. Kurada Michiru, a lacquer artist interviewed by the author, recalled: "A mudslide blocked our access to another workshop. What should have been a ten-minute drive became a mountain detour. Our workshop suffered severe earthquake damage and was later flooded by torrential rains. With a 13cm elevation difference, collapsed woodworking equipment, waterlogged timber, and a tilted workspace left us stranded." This "disruption of production spaces" left many artisans in a bind. Core materials like wood, machinery, pigments, and gold powder were all compromised, making restoration impossible. Makie artist Machigawa Kaoru recalled: "Much of the gold powder became mixed up, leaving it undetectable-now we can only use it as a base material hidden from view." These losses transcended economic losses, symbolizing the rupture of cultural production chains.

The disaster has exacerbated intergenerational imbalances in the lacquer art industry. Veteran lacquer artist Onihira Keiji remarked, "As a writer in my fifties with stable commissions, I can see how younger artisans-just starting out-face even greater challenges after such disasters. Young craftsmen, being the most vulnerable link in the 'inheritance chain,' are often forced to leave Wajima under production halts and economic pressures, leading to a loss of apprenticeship successors." Makie artist Yamazaki Mushu lamented, "Finding apprentices is now extremely difficult-not that they won't teach, but there are no one to take them." Hokuriku's already limited population has become even scarcer since the disaster, with fewer willing to stay long-term to learn. The broken master-apprentice system not only risks losing traditional techniques but also erodes the cultural soil that fosters local growth. This generational upheaval has further disrupted the social and economic fabric of Wajima's lacquer art community.

Meanwhile, social repercussions were quietly unfolding. Wajima, a small city where lacquer art serves as the economic lifeline, relies on lacquerware sales, tourism, and education as its core industries. The earthquake brought this entire ecosystem to a near standstill. The Wajima Morning Market-a vital symbol of local vitality-was destroyed and remained closed for years. Some stalls relocated to Kanazawa or Nanase for temporary morning markets, but visitor numbers plummeted. The economic collapse triggered psychological distress, with many young artisans losing confidence in their craft. Arakawa Fumihiko candidly admitted, 'Many couldn't wait for reconstruction or see hope, so they moved away. 'This' population exodus' caused a generational gap in cultural continuity, the most challenging aspect to restore in post-disaster cultural reconstruction.

4. Institutional Response: Cultural Rescue and Administrative Friction

In the aftermath of the disaster, Japan's cultural emergency response system was swiftly activated, with the government, industry organizations, and civil society forming a multi-tiered rescue network. The Ministry of Culture dispatched a team of "Cultural Heritage Doctors" to the disaster area to conduct on-site assessments and provide restoration guidance for damaged workshops and collections. The Chubu Economic and Industrial Bureau established the "Traditional Craft Industry Support Grant (Disaster Recovery Program)," focusing on subsidies for material losses, equipment repairs, and operational recovery, with a maximum subsidy rate of 75% capped at 10 million yen. This mechanism is regarded as the cornerstone of Japan's cultural disaster governance system, particularly its "raw material assurance" clause, which aligns with the practical needs of traditional crafts. Moreover, staff repeatedly verify whether affected lacquer artists have submitted materials-a detail that reflects the rational yet compassionate nature of Japan's post-disaster administrative system.

In parallel with official responses, grassroots organizations across Japan swiftly mobilized. Lacquer art societies and institutions in Tokyo, Kyoto, Osaka, and other cities held charity exhibitions, while the nonprofit platform CAMPFIRE launched crowdfunding campaigns. Multiple media outlets

organized online auctions, with some exhibitions drawing large crowds of visitors and donors. These initiatives not only provided immediate financial support for the Wajima lacquer art community but also reignited public interest and emotional connection to traditional craftsmanship.

Meanwhile, the Wajima Museum of Urushi Art and the Wajima Shikken(Wajima Institute of Lacquer Art)emerged as pivotal institutions in post-disaster cultural reconstruction. Although temporarily closed after the earthquake, the museum swiftly organized the "Noto Peninsula Earthquake and Noto Heavy Rain Revival Memorial Exhibition," showcasing restored artworks and student creations. Media outlets hailed the exhibition as a "symbolic display of cultural rebuilding," highlighting its role in providing spiritual and cultural support to the public [5]. Beyond serving as a form of artistic healing, the post-disaster exhibition reshaped societal perceptions of traditional crafts. Many consumers resumed purchasing "support for Wajima " handicrafts, with lacquerware sales even rebounding in the short term.

However, these developments have also exposed systemic structural friction. Some workshops report that while subsidies exist, the application process is overly complex and time-consuming. Craftsmen like Lacquerware artist Machigawa Kaoru, who use expensive gold powder in their creations, face exclusion from compensation because their lacquerware's base material doesn't qualify as 'wood-based lacquer craftsmanship,' creating policy blind spots. Another writer, Kiyoshi Kibayashi, noted that although he received about three-quarters of the material subsidy, 'filling out the paperwork took nearly a month.' These issues highlight the dual challenges of accessibility and fairness within Japan's institutional emergency response system-funds exist, but whether they effectively reach those truly in need remains a weak link in the post-disaster management framework.

Further analysis reveals structural imbalances in Wajima 's reconstruction. As a small city centered on the "livelihood-tourism-community" synergy, its urban functions have been slow to recover due to damaged historical districts, infrastructure bottlenecks, and labor mismatch. The earthquake-triggered fire at Wajima 's " Wajima Morning Market" destroyed over 50,000 square meters of area and approximately 300 buildings, ranking among Japan's most severe local fires in recent years [6]. The disappearance of traditional markets disrupted the "neighborhood-tourist-industry" cycle, while delayed public funding and reconstruction approvals reduced the market to a mere "temporary market" operation, with its scale shrinking to less than one-third of pre-disaster levels [7]. Meanwhile, Kuroshima Town, designated as a "Preservation Area for Important Traditional Building Clusters," has seen slow restoration progress under strict procedures by the Cultural Affairs Agency [7]. While this helps preserve authenticity, it hinders economic recovery. Infrastructure challenges persist, with National Route 249 and other major roads expected to remain partially closed until 2029 [8], creating ongoing constraints for tourism and logistics.

Furthermore, the influx of migrant workers has strained accommodation and driven up prices, with some hotels being leased out for extended periods. Residents have reported theft incidents [9]. This "reconstruction-first" approach has compressed cultural and living spaces, exposing structural imbalances in post-disaster resource allocation. Overall, the sluggish reconstruction of Wajima is not an administrative failure but a complex outcome of overlapping disasters, institutional constraints, and social structural misalignment. The cultural shock from the Noto earthquake extends beyond the destruction of workshops and materials-it represents a systemic upheaval for a city centered on intangible cultural heritage, affecting both institutional and social dimensions.

The post-disaster reconstruction of Wajima lacquer art stands as a tangible demonstration of "cultural resilience." It showcases Japan's maturity in institutional, administrative, and community collaboration, while exposing the shortcomings of "point-to-point support" and "professional industry alignment." While charity sales and exhibitions temporarily restored confidence and financial resources, the long-term restoration of cultural transmission chains still requires sustained policy support. This disaster highlights that intangible cultural heritage preservation is not merely a "cultural

issue," but a cross-disciplinary challenge involving social systems and risk governance. The critical questions posed by the Wajima case for future heritage protection systems include: How to swiftly rebuild both "production spaces" and "psychological spaces" after disasters? How can artisans re-establish order amidst chaos? These questions demand profound solutions for the future of intangible cultural heritage conservation.

5. Social dimension of cultural resilience: from disaster to regeneration

The post-disaster reconstruction of Wajima 's lacquer artistry represents not merely a localized cultural rescue, but a profound test of modern intangible cultural heritage (ICH) protection systems. The disaster simultaneously disrupted the production chain, transmission mechanisms, and community life of lacquer art, exposing multifaceted challenges in ICH preservation within post-disaster contexts. These challenges involve institutional responses while also testing social networks, cultural identity, and psychological resilience. The recovery of Wajima demonstrates that ICH resilience cannot be sustained by a single factor, but requires coordinated efforts from governments, industries, educational institutions, and communities.

In the development of emergency management concepts and institutional frameworks, Japan has gradually established a cultural heritage emergency response mechanism through its long-term experience with frequent earthquakes. Following the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake, the Japan Cultural Agency launched the "Cultural Heritage Rescue" system, transitioning cultural asset protection from temporary rescue efforts to institutionalized responses through expert networks, on-site assessments, and preservation-restoration procedures (Cultural Agency, 2012). After the Noto Earthquake, the Chubu Economic and Industrial Bureau, local governments, art museums, and research institutions collaborated to form a tripartite collaborative structure integrating "cultural relic rescue, workshop restoration, and industrial support." However, institutional perfection does not guarantee smooth implementation. Interviews revealed that some individual workshops failed to receive timely support due to difficulties in quantifying material losses and complex subsidy procedures. While volunteers demonstrated strong willingness, their lack of professional restoration skills created "tensions between goodwill and efficiency." Therefore, the key to institutional effectiveness lies not in the existence of mechanisms themselves, but in their ability to genuinely reach specific individuals and achieve "institutional accessibility."

From a material and industrial perspective, the reconstruction of Wajima demonstrates a multi-source funding network structure. A flexible subsidy system is formed through central and local fiscal allocations, corporate donations, crowdfunding, and charity sales. The "Traditional Craft Industry Support Grant" established by the Central Economic and Industrial Bureau stands out as a model initiative. It supports not only large-scale workshops but also independent artisans and small-scale workshops, covering the entire process from "raw material procurement to equipment restoration and market recovery." This approach, which analyzes and subsidizes through the lens of "industry chains," reflects a practical understanding of traditional craft production logic: the continuity of lacquer art relies on interconnected elements including lacquer tree resources, body craftsmen, auxiliary materials like gold and silver powders, tools, equipment, and market networks. Any disruption in these links could lead to systemic stagnation. Therefore, the core of post-disaster reconstruction lies in restoring the cyclical capacity of cultural production systems, rather than merely providing symbolic assistance to "heritage bearers" or "venues."

Social participation and public communication played equally vital roles in this reconstruction process. Following the earthquake, art institutions in Tokyo, Kyoto, and other regions successively hosted "Praying for Wajima" themed exhibitions and charity sales, while online crowdfunding platforms launched support initiatives. Documentary films and media features transformed Wajima

lacquer art from a local incident into a public social issue. These narrative practices, through emotional resonance and value re-recognition, reinterpreted "traditional craftsmanship" as a symbol of life's meaning, a carrier of memory, and a cultural identity during the disaster. Though not institutionalized, the resulting social support network demonstrated strong cohesive power, providing momentum for the psychological and community-level reorganization of post-disaster cultural entities.

In the education and heritage preservation system, the multi-node transmission network formed by the Wajima Shikken, Wajima Museum of Urushi Art, and local workshops played an irreplaceable pivotal role in post-disaster recovery. Teachers and students directly participated in workshop cleanup, document rescue, and artwork restoration, enabling "learning" and "reconstruction" to occur simultaneously at the same site. The transmission of traditional craftsmanship no longer remained confined to classrooms but was reshaped through real-world contexts during the crisis. This "on-site teaching-based inheritance" not only enhanced apprentices 'practical skills and cultural understanding but also accelerated the process of "rebuilding communities through collective labor." However, the disaster also exposed vulnerable links in the heritage ecosystem: rising living costs and industrial shutdowns accelerated the exodus of young artisans, putting apprenticeship chains at risk of disruption and loosening the community's "people-land-industry" coupling relationship. This indicates that post-disaster reconstruction is not merely about restoring materials and techniques, but also about rebuilding social relationships and cultural belonging.

From an international perspective, the Wajima case highlights that intangible cultural heritage (ICH) protection should not be seen as preserving traditional crafts, but rather as a cultural practice system rooted in specific regions. Post-disaster cultural reconstruction requires simultaneous attention to restoring "production spaces" and rebuilding "cultural ecosystems." ICH protection must evolve from "static preservation" to "dynamic regeneration," shifting focus from outcomes to processes, and from technical skills to communities and daily life. Within this framework, "institutional accessibility","chain restoration," and "community reconnection" emerge as three key pathways to achieving cultural resilience.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the post-disaster reconstruction of Wajima lacquer art demonstrates that the essence of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) preservation lies not merely in sustaining the craft itself, but in the viability of its production chain, transmission framework, and community networks. Institutional support, professional associations, art museums, training systems, and local mutual aid collectively form the foundation for recovery. True cultural resilience, however, manifests as the renewed connection of the "people-land-craft" relationship under new historical conditions. Post-disaster reconstruction is not about reverting to the past, but about rebuilding an ecological structure capable of continuously generating cultural meaning through transformation. The Wajima experience thus provides a deeply insightful perspective for understanding the recovery logic of ICH in disaster contexts.

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