

# Ryukobo

*Kumihimo*: sophisticated craft of silk braids embodying and updating the culture of *iki*

## Information

4-11 Nihombashi-Tomizawacho, Chuo Ward,  
Tokyo #103-0006  
Tel: +81-3-3664-2031  
Mail: ryukobo@silver.ocn.ne.jp  
Web: <http://ryukobo.jp/>



A rare studio that does everything from spinning raw silk threads to creating designs

*Kumihimo* is a densely braided cord made by weaving together several hundred threads based on a design called *ayagaki*. It consists from threads that are about 230cm that ends up around 150cm long after braiding. The threads are looped around a braiding stand (*kumidai*), and each thread is lifted up under “braiding set rules”, and cross weaved to create a certain pattern. There are supposedly over 350 of these “set rules”, and when combining different rules into single design, the possible patterns are infinite.

Ryukobo was found as a company in Nihombashi by the late Mannosuke Fukuda. Counting from their ancestors who were already running their studio, it holds more than 120 years of history. The studio is currently headed by Ryuta Fukuda’s father Takashi Fukuda, who is a prominent figure in Edo *kumihimo* and selected as a “Tokyo Meister”, given only to those with outstanding techniques. Ryukobo uses several types of *kumidai* used to braid *obijime* (cord for holding a kimono sash in place), including *maru-dai*, *ayatake-dai*, *kaku-dai*, *taka-dai*, *naiki-dai* and *kagouchi-dai*. The craftsmen make use of the particular features of each stand to create various *kumihimo*.

Moreover, the 50 craftsmen working there spin the silk threads themselves and then dye them in different colors; they even come up with designs for the *kumihimo*. It’s a collective effort, making Ryukobo a relatively rare studio even throughout Japan. Supported by a strong base of ardent customers spanning those working in *kabuki* and for the Imperial household to people who love wearing traditional Japanese clothes or need a *kumihimo*, Ryukobo sells almost 300,000 *kumihimo* each year at retail outlets and department stores alone. In the recent blockbuster Japanese animation film “Your Name” (*Kimi no Na wa*), there’s a scene in which one of the lead characters uses a *kumihimo* to tie up her hair. Ryukobo has also created and commercialized an actual *kumihimo* based on that scene.



## Making parachute cords has supported the studio's uninterrupted history

The history of *kumihimo* itself dates back to quite ancient times. Its origin in Japan is said to be the Jomon pottery, with its impressed-rope and flame patterns, is the world's oldest earthenware. The roots of modern-day *kumihimo* is generally considered to be around the 5th to 6th century, when Buddhism was introduced to Japan from the Eurasian continent. *Kumihimo* was initially used as an accessory item for the Shosoin Buddhist altar articles, scriptures and scrolls. Then in the Nara period men and women started to use *kumihimo* with their ceremonial clothes, with the archetypal image being a *kumihimo* wrapped around the waist of Prince Shotoku. However, during the 14th century, *kumihimo* wasn't always used as a decorative accessory for everyday clothes as it is today. Naturally, as people's lifestyles have changed over time, so has the usage of *kumihimo*.

One major shift in the way *kumihimo* was used is deeply connected to when the tea culture began to flourish in Japan from the 11th or 12th century onwards. Using *kumihimo* to tie together tea ceremony tools gave birth to the *musubi* culture of tying up objects. Each household developed their own way of tying objects together for a particular purpose, such as tying an object in such a way that it would close immediately after opening to ensure no poison would leak out.

Then the *samurai* class emerged in Japan, and they started using *kumihimo* as a sword strap and on their armour and helmets. During the late Edo period, *geisha* used *kumihimo* as *obijime* during a ceremony to mark the first crossing of the arched bridge at Kameido Tenjin Shrine; this is said to have started the trend among common women of using *obijime*. It is also when the *kumidai* braiding stands were developed – it seems that until then, craftsmen braided the *kumihimo* using their fingers.

The predecessor to Ryukobo was founded a short time later, in the latter half of the 19th century during the Meiji period. It goes without saying that Ryukobo has experienced major disasters, wars and other such turning points during its history.

“We’ve traditionally been a manufacturer of *kumihimo* used as *obijime*. When Japan prohibited the manufacture of luxury items during the war, stores selling *kimonos* and the fabrics used to make them had to shut down temporarily. Ryukobo managed to remain in business by applying the techniques for braiding *kumihimo* to make cords for parachutes used to rescue people. So when the war ended, we could return to making *obijime*. But by then, there was a huge change in the everyday clothes worn by Japanese people. The trend had shifted from traditional Japanese clothing to Western-style outfits, and *obijime* were replaced by belts; this resulted in a decline in producers of Japanese clothing.

Traditional Japanese culture such as *sumo* and *kabuki* has remained in society, and it's thanks to specializing in producing *kumihimo* for those particular fields that we've been able to continue Ryukobo as our family business. We make *kumihimo* for the *haori* (formal coats worn with *kimono*) of *kabuki* actors from the Nakamura and Ichikawa lineage, but when someone passes away, we need to make many *kumihimo* in a hurry. Even if the demand for *kumihimo* declines, we still need to keep making them so we have a ready supply on hand. If we just give up and stop making *kumihimo*, that's when it will be the end of our business.”

The current Ryukobo was founded in 1963 in Nihombashi by the late Mannosuke Fukuda. The studio is currently

headed by Takashi Fukuda, who is a prominent figure in Edo kumihimo and selected as a traditional craftsman of Tokyo. *Kumihimo* are mostly made from silk threads. These days kimonos can be made using imported materials from China and Brazil, but Ryukobo has fastidiously kept using only domestically produced materials. The craftsmen working there spin the silk threads themselves and then dye them in different colors; they even come up with designs for the *kumihimo*. It's a collective effort, making Ryukobo a relatively rare studio even throughout Japan.



### Based in traditions, but with a spirit of continual innovation

Ryukobo has a strong base of ardent customers include those working in the theatrical world, *rakugo* comic story tellers, grand tea masters, members of the Imperial household, and people who love wearing traditional Japanese clothes or just need a *kumihimo* for a particular reason. While its main business is rooted in Japan's indigenous and traditional culture, recently the studio has been applying the techniques used to braid *kumihimo* to create a variety of non-traditional items. Leading this new direction forward is the young craftsman Ryuta Fukuda.

"While it's important to remain the same, it's even more important to keep changing." This is something Ryuta's father, Takashi, often says. Ryukobo has continued to evolve with the times, and its strong foundation – namely, its acquired techniques in skilfully manipulating threads - has and enabled the studio to keep up with the changing times. Naturally it's quite rare these days for people to wear traditional Japan clothes daily. So every day, Ryuta has been devising and creating new *kumihimo* items that people today can wear or use daily.



It takes around eight hours of work a day for about one week to 10 days to create a basic *kumihimo*. It's extremely monotonous, time-consuming and laborious work that requires considerable perseverance. So the craftsmen need to remain calm at all times in order to not make any mistakes in the braiding; the key to creating *kumihimo* is have presence of mind and always keeping good control of one's self. The braiding stand's countertop is also called a "mirror", in reference to the emotional state of the craftsmen being reflected in the quality of the braiding. It's easy to understand the concentration required when watching the craftsmen at work and while talking to them; but according to Ryuta, one of the current issues the industry is facing is how the labor-intensive process of braiding a *kumihimo* is not fully reflected in the finished product.

“When I display our *kumihimo* at overseas exhibitions, I’m often asked ‘What’s this?’ and ‘Is it a rope?’. Once you actually touch the *kumihimo*, you can feel and sense the high quality and other elements that differentiate *kumihimo* from rope; but even then, it’s difficult to know what *kumihimo* is used for simply by touching it. Of course it’s also because there is no *kimono* culture overseas, and so it’s an unfortunate reality that most people outside of Japan don’t know what *kumihimo* is. That’s why recently I’ve been actively working on creating completely new and surprising items using *kumihimo* – I feel I have to do this to make it more well known.

The term “traditional culture” tends to be used too easily and freely. It seems Japanese people themselves are apt to extol “traditional culture”, but at the same time refer to it with a sense of detachment. Put simply, “traditional culture” is sublime and therefore to change it is taboo. As stated at the start though, the usage of *kumihimo* and the item itself have evolved through the course of history. So this current initiative to change the form of *kumihimo* is not turning one’s back on its tradition, but rather something that must be done to evolve its history.



### New material usage drawn from collaboration with worldwide brand

“We were approached by renowned fashion brand which was looking *kumihimo* studio. We ended up collaborating with the designer to create earrings, belts and necklaces made with acrylic resin and sealed and shaped using our *kumihimo*. We pride ourselves on being one of the top brands in traditional Japanese clothing, but conversely we are also very much aware that Ryukobo is unknown in Western clothing. So we believed that even if we created our own line of accessories, it would have no impact in any market or with anyone. But we’ve been able to clear that barrier thanks to collaborating with the brand; it was a huge step forward for us.”

The techniques used to create *kumihimo* work well with fine threads. When collaborating with the brand, Ryukobo used acrylic threads with good quality colors.

“Recently I’ve been using braiding techniques with different materials, such as nickel conducting wire and genetically-modified thread that glows in black light. I’ve also come up with some original items other than *obijime*. For example, I’ve used the same acrylic item that is sealed and shaped using *kumihimo* – just like in the fashion brand collaboration – and added a USB to it, and I’ve also made bracelets, camera straps, ball pens, chopsticks and glasses using *kumihimo*. I often have the chance to assist at Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples, and I’ve been recycling the fallen leaves from there by using them in vegetable-based dyes and creating *kumihimos*. I’m definitely not making these new items recklessly; I just don’t know where or what I’ll be absorbed in next. I’m simply on a quest to discover new possibilities for *kumihimo*.”

Tradition and innovation; these are two exceedingly trite words that Ryukobo is striving to embody in its creations. Rather than taking on the challenge of adopting completely new techniques, the studio is preserving its traditional techniques while using them with different materials and forms to create new items. “This approach makes the most sense to me”, comments Ryuta.

“Sometimes we use as many as 24 *kumihimo* balls (of thread) of various materials at one time. It believe there is still so much potential in how we can use *kumihimo* – I’m positive about the future of this traditional craft.”



### Creating products as new marketing tools to make *kumihimo* more well known

Despite Ryuta's positive mindset, Ryukobo is also no exception when it comes to the issue of how to carry on the traditions and expand the potential of this craft.

"One of the major issues we're facing is the lack of successors. There are currently over 50 craftsmen working at Ryukobo, but there are only a handful in their 30s to 40s. Recently I have made a flag made from *kumihimo*, which I believe could be a new possibility for this craft. I strongly believe this is how we can prevent people from misunderstanding what *kumihimo* is and mistaking it for just a piece of rope."

If we just look back at what's been happening so far, it is difficult to see what lies ahead. Recently, traditional arts such as *kabuki*, *noh* and *rakugo* are adding easy-to-understand explanations to make them more accessible to a wider audience; this initiative is developing these traditional arts into high-class entertainment that is also aligned with the value and interests of contemporary society. There are probably not a few people who view this with some scepticism though.

However, again this is no doubt based on the preconception of traditional culture is sublime and therefore to change it is taboo. Yet it's possible others may perceive these changes with fascination. Ryukobo and *kumihimo* will most likely continue to change and evolve; and as these changes awaken someone to the appeal of this traditional craft, its 1400 years history will always challenge itself to update.